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You will note that all the stories *in this issue are NEW — no reprints.*

Which editorial policy appeals to you more? — every story new — or half the stories new (the very best we can find, by the best writers) and the other half reprints (most of them "unknown" and many of them literary discoveries).

Your editors would be deeply grateful to every reader who is kind enough to send us a postcard, telling us your preference — new stories, or half new and half old.

Now, let us begin this all-new issue with the case in which Inspector Hazlerigg learned why he should fear an amateur in violence.

THE UNSTOPPABLE MAN

by MICHAEL GILBERT

WE WERE TALKING ABOUT VIOLENCE. "Some people," I said, "are afraid of people and some people are afraid of things."

Chief Inspector Hazlerigg gave this remark more consideration than it seemed to merit and then said: "Illustration, please."

"Well, some people are afraid of employers and some of razors."

"I don't think that sort of fear is a constant," said Hazlerigg. "It changes as you grow older, you know — or get more experienced. I haven't much occasion for bodily violence in my present job." (He was one of the chief inspectors on the cab rank at Scotland Yard.) "When I was a young constable the customers I chiefly disliked were drunken women. Nowadays — well, perhaps I should look at it the other way round. Perhaps I could describe the sort of man whom *I* should hate to have after *me*."

In the pause that followed I tried hard to visualize what precise mixture of thug and entrepreneur would terrify the red-faced, gray-eyed, bulky, equitable man sitting beside me.

"He'd be English," said Hazlerigg at last, "Anglo-Saxon anyway, getting on for middle-age and a first-class businessman. He would have had some former experience of lethal weapons — as an infantry soldier, perhaps, in one of the world wars. But definitely an amateur — an amateur in violence. He would believe passionately in the justice of what he was doing — but without ever allowing the fanatic to rule the businessman.

Now that's a type I should hate to have after me! He's unstoppable."

"Is that a portrait from life?" I said.

"Yes," said Hazlerigg slowly. "Yes, it's a portrait from life. It all happened a good time ago — in the early thirties, when I was a junior inspector. Even now, you'll have to be very careful about names, you know, because if the real truth came out — however, judge for yourself."

Inspector Hazlerigg first met Mr. Collet (*the* Collets, the shipping people — this one was the third of the dynasty) in his managing director's mahogany-lined office. Hazlerigg was there by appointment. He had arrived at the building in a plain van and had been introduced via the goods entrance, but once inside he had been treated with every consideration.

Even during the few minutes which had elapsed before he could be brought face to face with Mr. Collet, Hazlerigg had managed to collect a few impressions. Small things, from the way the commissionaire and the messenger spoke about him, and more still from the way his secretary spoke *to* him: that they liked him and liked working for him; that they knew something was wrong and were sorry.

They didn't, of course, know exactly what the trouble was. Hazlerigg did.

Kidnaping — the extorting of money by kidnaping — is a filthy thing. Fortunately, it does not seem to come very easily to the English criminal. But there was a little wave of it that year.

Mr. Collet had an only child, a boy of nine. On the afternoon of the previous day he had been out with his aunt, Mr. Collet's sister, in the park. A car had overtaken them on an empty stretch. A man had got out, pitched the boy into the back of the car, and driven off. As simple as that.

"So far as we know," said Hazlerigg, "there's just the one crowd. I'll be quite frank. We know very little about them. But there have been four cases already, and the features have been too much alike for coincidence."

"Such as —?" said Mr. Collet. His voice and his hands, Hazlerigg noticed, were under control. He couldn't see the eyes. Mr. Collet was wearing heavy sunglasses.

"Well — they don't ask for too much to start with, that's one thing. The first demand has always been quite modest. The idea being that a man will be more likely to go on paying once he has started."

"Right so far," said Mr. Collet. "They asked for only £5,000 — They could have had it this morning — if I'd thought it would do any good."

"Then there's also their method of collecting. It's disarming. They employ known crooks. I don't know what they pay them — just enough to make it worth their while to take the risk. These crooks are strictly carriers only. We could arrest them at the moment they contact you without getting any nearer to the real organizers."

"The Piccadilly side of Green Park, at 2 o'clock tomorrow," said Mr. Col-

let. "I got the rendezvous quite openly over the telephone. Could they be followed?"

"That's where the organization really starts," said Hazlerigg. "Every move after that is worked out — and when you come to think about it the cards are very heavily stacked in their favor. All they've got to do is to hand the money on. There are a hundred ways of doing it. They might pass it over in a crowd in an underground train or a bus in the rush hour, or they might be picked up by car and driven somewhere fast, or they might hand it over in a cinema. They might get rid of the money the same day, or they might wait a week."

"Yes," said Mr. Collet, "a little organization and that part shouldn't be too difficult. Any other peculiarities about this crowd?"

He said this as businessman might inquire about a firm with whom he was going to trade.

Hazlerigg hesitated. What he was going to say had to be said some time. It might as well be said now.

"Yes, sir," he said. "There's this to consider. However much the victim pays — however often he pays — however promptly he pays — he doesn't get the child back. You've given us the best chance so far by coming to us immediately." Mr. Collet said nothing. "You know Roger Barstow — he lost his little girl — Zilla was her name. He paid nine times. More than £100,000 — until he had no more left and said so. Next morning they found Zilla; in the swill bin at the back of his house."

There was another silence. Hazlerigg saw the whites of the knuckle-bones start up for a moment on one of Mr. Collet's thin brown hands. At last he got to his feet and said: "Thank you, Inspector. I have your contact number. I'll get hold of you as soon as I — as soon as anything happens."

As he walked to the door he took off his glasses for the first time and Hazlerigg saw in his eyes that he had got his ally. It had been a risk, but it had come off.

Mr. Collet was going to fight.

When the door had closed behind the chief inspector Mr. Collet thought for a few moments and then rang the bell and asked for Mr. Stevens.

Mr. Stevens, who was a month or two short of fifteen, was the head of the Collet messenger service, and a perfectly natural organizer. He spent a good deal of his time organizing the messenger boys of the firm into a sort of trade union, and he had already engineered two beautifully timed strikes, the second of which had called for Mr. Collet's personal intervention.

It says a good deal for both parties that when Mr. Collet sent for him and asked for his help, young Stevens listened carefully to what he had to say and promised him the fullest assistance of himself and his organization.

"No film stuff," said Mr. Collet. "These men are real crooks. They're dangerous. And they're wideawake.

They expect to be followed. We're going to do this on business lines."

That was Wednesday. At 4 o'clock on Thursday afternoon Inspector Hazlerigg again visited Archangel Street, taking the same precautions. Mr. Collet was at his desk. "You've got something for me. . . ." It was more a statement than a question.

"Before I answer that," said Mr. Collet, "I want something from you. I want your promise that you won't act on my information without my permission."

Hazlerigg said: "All right. I can't promise not to go on with such steps as I'm already taking. But I promise not to use your information until you say so. What do you know?"

"I know the names of most of the men concerned," said Mr. Collet. "I know where my son is — I know where these people are hiding."

When Hazlerigg had recovered his breath he said: "Perhaps you'll explain."

"I thought a good deal," said Mr. Collet, "about what you told me — about the sort of people we were dealing with. Particularly about the men who would make contact with me and carry back the money. It was obvious that they weren't afraid of violence. They weren't even, basically, afraid of being arrested. That was part of the risk. They certainly weren't open to any sort of persuasion. If they observed the routine, which had no doubt been carefully laid down for them, they would take the money from me and get it back to their employers, without giving us any chance of following them. Their position seemed to be pretty well impregnable. In the circumstances it seemed — do you play bridge, Inspector?"

"Badly," said Hazlerigg. "But I'm very fond of it."

"Then you understand the Vienna Coup."

"In theory — though I could never work it. It's a sort of squeeze. You start by playing away one of your winning aces, isn't that it?"

"Exactly," said Mr. Collet. "You give — or appear to give — your opponents an unexpected gift. And like all unexpected gifts it throws them off balance and upsets their defense. I decided to do the same. To be precise, I gave them £5,000 *more* than they asked for. I met these men — there were two of them as I told you — by appointment in Green Park. I simply opened my brief-case and put a brown paper packet into their hands. They opened it quickly, and as they were doing so I said: 'Ten thousand pounds in one pound notes — that's right, isn't it?' I could almost see it hit them. To give them time to cover up I said: 'When do I see my boy?' The elder of the two men said: 'You'll be seeing him soon. We'll ring you tomorrow.' Then they pushed off. I could see them starting to argue."

Mr. Collet paused. Inspector Hazlerigg, who was still trying to work out the angles, said nothing.

"The way I figured it out," said Mr. Collet, "they'd have all their

plans made for handing on £5,000 to their employers. So I gave them 10,000. That meant 5,000 for themselves if they kept quiet about it, and played it right. But I'd put all the notes in one packet, you see. They had to be divided out. Then they had to split the extra 5,000 among themselves — they were both in on it. Above all, they had to get somewhere safe and somewhere quiet and talk it out. You see what that meant. Their original plan — the careful one laid down for them by the bosses — had to be scrapped.

"They had to make another plan, and make it rather quickly. It would be something simple. They'd either go to one of their own houses, or a safe friend's house — and it would probably be somewhere with a telephone — because they'd have to invent some sort of story for the bosses to explain why they'd abandoned the original plan. That last bit was only surmise, but it was a fair business risk."

"Yes," said Hazlerigg. "I see. You still had to follow them, though."

"Not me," said Mr. Collet. "It was the boys who did that. The streets round the park were full of them. They're a sort of car-watching club — you see them anywhere in the streets of London if you look. They collect car numbers. Boy of mine called Stevens ran it. He's a born organizer. I went straight back to the office. Fifteen minutes later I got a call. Just an address, near King's Cross.

"I passed it on to a friend of mine — he's quite a senior official, so I won't give you his name. Inside five minutes he had the line from that house tapped. He was just in time to collect the outgoing call. That was that. It was to a house in Essex. Here's the address." He pushed a slip of paper across. "That's the name."

"Just like that," said Hazlerigg. "Simple. Scotland Yard have been trying to do it for six months."

"I had more at stake than you."

"Yes," said Hazlerigg. "What happens now?"

"Now," said Mr. Collet, "We sit back and wait."

Continuing the story, Hazlerigg said to me: "I think that was one of the bravest and coolest things I ever saw a man do. He was quite right, of course. The people we were dealing with moved by instinct — that sort of deadly instinct which those people get who sleep with one finger on the trigger.

"When their messengers reported the change of plan — I don't know what sort of story they put up — their bristles must have been on end. These people can smell when something's wrong. They're so used to doublecrossing other people that they get a sort of second sight about it themselves. If we'd rushed them then, we should never have got the boy alive. So we waited. We had a man watch the house — it was a big, rather lonely house, between Pitsea and Rayleigh on the north of the Thames."

And, meanwhile, Mr. Collet sat in

his mahogany-lined office and transacted the business of his firm. On the fourth morning he got a letter, in a painstaking schoolboy script.

Dear Father,

I am to write this to you. You are to pay five thousand pounds more. They will telephone you how to pay. I am quite well. It is quite a nice house. It is quite a nice room. The sun wakes me in the early morning.

Love from David.

P.S. Please be quick.

Mr. Andrews, senior partner in the firm of Andrews and Mackay, house agents of Pitsea, summed up his visitor at one glance which took in the silk tie, the pigskin brief-case and the hood of the chauffeur-driven Daimler standing outside the office, and said in his most deferential voice: "Certainly, Mr. — er — Robinson. Anything we can do to help you. It's not everybody's idea of a house, but if you're looking for something quiet and secluded —"

"I understand that it's occupied at the moment," said Mr. Robinson.

"Temporarily," agreed Mr. Andrews. "But you could have possession. The owner let it on short notice to a syndicate of men who are interested in a new color process. They needed the big grounds — the quiet, you understand, and the freedom from interruption. The only difficulty which occurs to me is that you will not be able to inspect the house today. By the terms of our arrangement we have to give at least forty-eight hours' notice."

Mr. Robinson thought for a moment and then said: "Have you such a thing as a plan of the house?"

"Why certainly," said Mr. Andrews. "We had a very careful survey made when the house was put up for sale. Here you are — on two floors only, you see."

"Only one bedroom," said Mr. Robinson, "looks due east?"

"Why, yes." Mr. Andrews was hardened to the vagaries of clients.

"The sun wakes me in the early morning," said Mr. Robinson softly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing," said Mr. Robinson. "Nothing. Thinking aloud. A bad habit. Would it be asking too much if I borrowed these plans for a day?"

"Why, of course," said Mr. Andrews. "Keep them for as long as you like."

Four o'clock of a perfect summer afternoon. It was so silent that the clack of a scythe blade on a stone sounded clear across the valley where the big gray house dozed in the sun.

As the double chime of the half-hour sounded from Rayleigh Church a figure appeared on the dusty road. It was a man, in postman's uniform, wheeling a bicycle.

The woman in the lodge answered the bell and unlocked one of the big gates, without comment. Then she returned to her back room, picked up the house telephone, and said: "All right. It's only the postman."

It was a mistake which might have cost her very dearly.

As Mr. Collet wheeled his borrowed machine slowly up the long drive he was thinking about the bulky sack which rested on the saddle and balanced there with difficulty. He knew that some very sharp eyes would be watching his approach. It couldn't be helped though. He had been able to see no better method of getting this particular apparatus up to the house.

He propped his bicycle against the pillar of the front door, lifted the sack down, keeping the mouth of it gathered in his left hand, and rang the bell. So far, so good.

The door was opened by a man in corduroys and a tweed jacket. He might have been a gardener or a gamekeeper. Mr. Collet, looking at his eyes, knew better.

"Don't shout," he said. The gun in his hand was an argument.

For a moment the man stared. Then he jumped to one side and started to open his mouth.

Even for an indifferent shot three yards is not a long range. The big bullet lifted the man back onto his heels like a punch under the heart and crumpled him onto the floor.

In the deep silence which followed the roar of the gun, Mr. Collet raced for the stairs. The heavy sack was against him but he made good time.

At the top he turned left with the sureness of a man who knows his mind and made for the room at the end of the corridor.

He saw that it was padlocked.

He put the muzzle of his gun as near to the padlock as he dared and pulled the trigger.

The jump of the gun threw the bullet up into the door jamb, missing the padlock altogether. He took a lower aim and tried again. Once, twice, again. The padlock buckled.

Mr. Collet kicked the door open and went in.

The boy was half-sitting, half-kneeling in one corner. Mr. Collet grinned at him with a good deal more confidence than he felt and said: "Stand out of the way, son. The curtain's going up for the last act."

As he spoke he was piling together mattresses, bedclothes, a rug, and a couple of small chairs into a barricade. When he had done this he opened the sack, pulled out the curious looking instrument from inside it, laid it beside his home-made parapet, and started working on it.

"Get into that far corner, son," said Mr. Collet. "And you might keep an eye on the window, just in case it occurs to the gentry to run a ladder up. Keep your head down, though. Here they come."

Joe Keller had tortured children and had killed for pleasure as well as for profit, but he was not physically a coward.

As he watched his henchman twitching on the hall floor, with the indifference of a man who has seen many men die, he was already working out his plan of attack.

"Take a long ladder," he said to one man, "and run it up to the window. Not the bedroom window — be your age. Put it against the landing window, this end. You can see the bedroom door from there, can't you? If it's shut, wait. If it's open, start shooting into the room — aim high. We'll go in together along the floor."

"He'll pick us off as we come."

"Not if Hoppy keeps him pinned down," said Keller. "Besides I reckon he doesn't know much about guns. It took him four shots to knock off that lock, didn't it? Any more arguments?"

Half a mile away, at points round the lip of the valley, four police cars had started up their engines at the sound of the first shot.

Hazlerigg was lying full length on the roof of one of them, a pair of long binoculars in his hands.

The Essex Superintendent looked up at him.

"I made that five shots," he said. "Do we start?"

"No, sir," said Hazlerigg. "You remember the signal we arranged."

"Do you think he can do his stuff?" The Superintendent sounded worried.

"He hasn't done badly so far," said Hazlerigg shortly, and silence settled down once more.

It was the driver of their car who saw it first, and gave a shout. From one of the first-floor windows of the house, unmistakable and ominous, a cloud of black and sooty smoke rolled upward.

The four cars started forward as one.

In that long upstairs passage things had gone according to plan — at first. Covered by a fusillade from the window, Joe Keller and his two assistants had inched their way forward on elbows and knees, their guns ahead of them.

At the end of the passage stood the door, open and inviting. The outer end of Mr. Collet's barricade came into sight as they advanced, but it was offset from the doorway, and Mr. Collet himself was still invisible.

Five yards to go.

Then, as the three men bunched for the final jump, it came out to meet them. A great red and yellow river of flame, overmantled with black smoke, burning and hissing and dripping with oil. As they turned to fly it caught them. . . .

"There was nothing very much for us to do when we did get there," said Inspector Hazlerigg. "We had to get Mr. Collet and the boy out of the window — the passage floor was red-hot. We caught one man in the garden. His nerve was gone — he seemed glad to give himself up.

"As for the other three — an infantry flame-thrower is not a discriminating sort of weapon, particularly at close quarters. There was just about enough left of them — well — say just about enough of the three of them to fill the swill bin where they found little Zilla Barstow. No, never tangle with a wholehearted amateur."

WINNER OF A THIRD PRIZE

Anthony Boucher's prize-winning "The Girl Who Married a Monster" is the ninth short story about Nick Noble, the dipso-detective who always sees the truth in wine. In these streamlined days, when a mystery novel often runs less than 200 pages, nine stories represent "good measure" for a volume of shorts. So we humbly suggest to Anthony Boucher's publishers that they consider collecting the Nick Noble stories in book form. Any of the classic short-story titles would fit — THE ADVENTURES OF NICK NOBLE *or* THE CASE BOOK OF NICK NOBLE; *or perhaps the publishers would prefer a more unorthodox title — like* NOBLE EXPERIMENTS — *or even* NOBLE OBLIGES.

THE GIRL WHO MARRIED A MONSTER

by ANTHONY BOUCHER

THERE SEEMED FROM THE START to be an atmosphere of pressured haste about the whole affair. The wedding date was set even before the formal announcement of the engagement; Doreen was so *very* insistent that Marie must come at once to Hollywood to serve as maid of honor; the engagement party was already getting under way when Marie arrived at the house; and she had barely had time for the fastest of showers and a change of clothes when she was standing beside Cousin Doreen and being introduced to the murderer.

Not that she knew it for certain at that moment. Then — with one of Doreen's friends adlibbing a be bop wedding march on the piano and another trying to fit limerick lyrics to it and all the others saying "*Dar*ling . . . !" and "But *my* agent says . . ." and "The liquor flows like glue around here" and "*Live TV?* But my dear, how quaintly *historical!*" — then it was only a matter of some forgotten little-girl memory trying to stir at the back of her mind and some very active big-girl instincts stirring in front. Later, with the aid of the man in gray and his strange friend with the invisible fly, it was to be terrifyingly positive. Now, it was vague and indefinable, and perhaps all the more terrifying for being so.

Marie had been prepared to dislike him. Doreen was only a year older than she (which was 27) and looked a year younger; there was something obscene about the idea of her marrying a man in his fifties. Marie was prepared for something out of Peter Arno, and for a moment it was a relief to find him so ordinary-looking —

just another man, like the corner grocer . . . or no, more like the druggist, the nice one that was a bishop in the Latter Day Saints. For a moment after that it was a pleasant surprise to find that he was easy, affable, even charming in a way you didn't expect of ordinary elderly men. He was asking all about her family (which was of course Doreen's, too) and about Utah and how was Salt Lake nowadays, and all the time he made you feel that he was asking about these subjects only because they were connected with *you.*

In these first few moments the Hollywood party seemed to vanish and it was almost as if she was still back in Salt Lake and it was perfectly understandable that Doreen should marry him no matter how old he was — and no matter how hard a little-girl memory tried to place the name LUTHER PEABODY (in very black type) and the photograph (much younger) that had gone with it.

At this point Doreen had said, "Luther, be nice to Marie, huh? I have to make like a hostess," and disappeared. Marie was alone with Luther Peabody, the party whirling around them like a montage gone mad. It wasn't quite what he said or where he touched her as he casually steered her toward the bar, though the words were deliberately suggestive and it was not a touch commonly bestowed by a bridegroom upon the maid of honor. It was more that the voice was too soft and the fingers were too soft and the eyes — the eyes that fixed her, and her alone, as if only they were in the room — the eyes were much too hard.

The little-girl memory was still a fragment; but whatever it was, it reinforced this sudden adult recognition of peril. Without conscious thought Marie found that she had evaded Peabody, slipped behind two men arguing about guild jurisdiction in TV, and lost herself in a deep chair in an obscure corner.

Her whole body was trembling, as if it had been, in some curiously public way, outraged. And she was thinking that by contrast, a Peter Arno Lecher-of-Great-Wealth would make a clean and welcome cousin-in-law.

It was in the corner that the man in gray found her.

"You're Doreen's cousin Marie," he stated. "My name's MacDonald. You don't have a drink. Or rather," he added, "you didn't have one." And he passed her one of the two martinis he was holding.

She managed, by an active miracle, not to spill any; but she still needed two sips before she could properly arrange her face into the right smile and say, "Thank you, sir."

"Good," he said. "I wasn't sure about plying you. One never knows with girls from Salt Lake."

"Oh, but I'm not a Saint."

"Who is? Thank God."

"I mean" (the smile came more easily now) "I'm not a 'Mormon.' Doreen isn't, either. Our fathers came to Salt Lake when they were both widowers, with us squalling on their

hands. They married Utah girls, and all this enormous 'Mormon' family you read about in Doreen's publicity is just step-family."

"Remind Doreen some time," he said dryly. "She's never disbelieved a word of her publicity. Including" (his eyes wandered about the brawling room) "the word 'starlet.' How long does one go on being a starlet? Is it semi-permanent, like being a Young Democrat? They're still dunning me for dues when I should be putting the money into a hair-restorer."

"Oh, but *you* are young!" she reacted hastily. She'd never have said so ordinarily — he must be in his late thirties. But she had stopped shaking and he was comfortable and reassuring and not at all like a middle-aged fragment of memory with soft fingers and eyes from hell.

Mac-what'sit seemed almost to read her thoughts. He looked across to the bar, where Luther Peabody was being charming to some columnist's third assistant leg-woman. "You just got in, didn't you?" he asked.

"Yes," Marie said uneasily. "It's all been done in such a rush. . . ."

"And you'd just as soon get out again." It wasn't a question. "I have a car. . . ."

"And that," said MacDonald, "is Catalina."

They were parked on a bluff in Palos Verdes. It was almost sunset.

"There's something so wonderful," Marie said softly, "about being on a high place and looking at something new. The this-is-the-place feeling."

"Kingdoms of the world . . ." MacDonald muttered. "You see, I knew Doreen when she first came here. Met her through a radio-actress friend of mine." His voice hardened oddly.

"Were you . . . ?" But Marie didn't finish the sentence. They had come almost close enough for such a question, but not quite.

". . . in love with Doreen?" MacDonald laughed. "Good Lord, no. No, I was thinking of the girl who introduced us. One of my best friends killed her."

Suddenly the photograph and the black type were very clear, and Marie knew the story that went with them.

MacDonald did not miss her sudden start. He eyed her speculatively. "That's why I recognized you — because I knew Doreen way back when. You don't look anything alike now, but back before she got the starlet treatment . . . And she had the same this-is-the-place look."

"And now . . ." Marie said.

"And now," MacDonald repeated. After a moment of silence he said, "Look. You'd better tell me about it, hadn't you? It's something you can't say to Doreen, and it isn't doing you any good bottled up."

Marie, almost to her own surprise, nodded. "Another martini first."

The seaside bar was small and almost deserted and exactly suited to letting one's hair down. "Not that it isn't as down as it can go, literally," Marie tried to smile.

"And very nice, too. Major difference between you and Doreen-that-was. Hers was always straight."

"I think she won't have it waved because she won't admit she's always been jealous of mine. No, that's catty and I shouldn't; but I think it *is* the only thing in me Doreen's ever envied. And it's your fault. I only said it because you're so easy to talk to."

"Occupational disease," said the man whose occupation she didn't know.

The drinks came and the waiter went and Marie tried to find the words for the thing that frightened her. "You see," she said, "I . . . know what it means to love the wrong man. Not just the wrong man, but a man who's *wrong*. I was a secretary at the radiation lab up at Berkeley and there was this research-worker. . . . You'd know his name; it's been in headlines. He was — it's a melodramatic word, but it's true — he was a traitor, and I was in love with him for months and never dreamed what he was like inside. I even wanted to defend him and stand by him, but then after he was convicted he took the mask off and for the first time . . . Anyway, that's why I went back to Utah. And why I know how Doreen can love this man and yet not know him . . . and why I have to *do* something.

"It isn't just 'woman's intuition,' or the fact that no man would ever see his eyes get like that or feel his fingers go softer than flesh. It's what I've remembered. It must be a long time ago, maybe fifteen years. I think I was in junior high. But there was this big case up in Portland or Seattle or some place. He was a . . . a Bluebeard, and this was the umpteenth wife he'd killed. It was all over the papers; everybody talked about it. And when you said something about a murder, I remembered it all and I could see the papers. It was the same name and the same face."

Now it was out, and she finished her martini in one gulp.

MacDonald showed no surprise. "That isn't," he said levelly, "the one I was thinking of. Maybe because we were obviously in junior high at different times. Funny how murder fascinates kids. I'll never forget Winnie Ruth Judd in 1931, even if I didn't understand half of it. And the one I'm remembering was a little before that, around '29. Right here in L. A. Same name, same face."

"But it can't be the same. Twice? He'd have been gassed the first time."

"Hanged, back then. But he must have been acquitted, both here and in Portland or wherever. Our innocent childish souls remember the grue, but not the trial."

"But they wouldn't acquit him twice, would they?"

"My dear girl, if you want statistics on the acquittal of murderers, even mass repeaters . . . You see, you came to a man in the right business."

Maybe it was the martini. Suddenly she felt that everything was going to be all right. This quiet man in gray would know what to do.

"Formally," he went on, "it's Lieutenant MacDonald, L.A.P.D., Homicide. I don't claim to bat a thousand, but that friend who killed the radio actress is in San Quentin now, doing life. All the information I can find on Luther Peabody, officially and unofficially, is yours to lay before Doreen. And no matter how much in love she is, it should be hard for her to keep her eyes shut."

"Lieutenant MacDonald, I love you," said Marie. "And you'll check your files right away and let me know?"

"Files?" said MacDonald. "Of course. And," he added with deliberate mystification, "I think I have another source that's even better."

"I'm damned if I see why," Doreen objected petulantly, "you had to run off from the party like that yesterday. It was one wingding of a party and after all as maid of honor you're part of the engagement. Besides, Luther was hurt. He liked you, and you didn't give him any chance to show it."

Marie pulled on a stocking and concentrated on straightening its seam. "Are you really in love with Luther?" she asked.

"I guess so. I like him. He's fun. Even on his feet. Oh—! Want to finish zipping this for me? It always sticks . . . What's the matter? Did I shock ums?"

"Well, I hadn't thought . . . I mean, he's so . . ."

"Old? Listen, darling, there's no substitute for experience. If you knew some of these young Hollywood glamor-boys . . ."

"Doreen . . ." The zipping task over, Marie was concentrating on the other stocking.

"Mmmm?"

"Maybe I shouldn't have as just a house guest, but I asked a friend to drop in for a cocktail."

"Oh? I was kind of hoping you and Luther and I could settle down for the afternoon and make up for yesterday. Who is he?"

"That nice MacDonald man I met at the party."

"Mac? Is that whom you ran away with? He's okay, I guess . . . if you like serious-minded cops. You two can have fun disapproving of me. Doreen Arlen, Girl Failure."

"Oh, Doreen, is it that bad?"

"No, don't mind me. I've got a deal cooking at CBS, and there's one of the independents that—Is that Luther already? How's my face? Quick!"

But it wasn't Luther Peabody. It was Lieutenant Donald MacDonald, and he said, "Hi, Doreen. I hope it isn't an imposition; I brought another guest."

Doreen shrugged. "Why doesn't somebody tell me—?" Then she broke off. She and Marie found themselves involuntarily staring at MacDonald's companion.

He was a small man, almost inhumanly thin. He might have been any age from 40 to 60, and he would probably go on looking much the same

until he was 80. The first thing that struck Marie was the dead whiteness of his skin — almost like the skin of a subterranean cave-dweller, or of a corpse. Then she saw the brilliant blue of his eyes, and an odd hint of so much behind the blue that she knew — despite the abnormal pallor, despite the skeletal thinness — this man was, in some way of his own, intensely alive.

"Miss Doreen Arlen," MacDonald said, "Miss Marie Arlen, may I present Mr. Noble?"

"Any friend of Mac's and stuff," said Doreen. "Come on in. Luther isn't here yet; you want to tend bar, Mac?"

And somehow they were all in the living room and MacDonald was mixing drinks and it was a party and MacDonald's Mr. Noble still hadn't said a word. Not until MacDonald was arguing with Doreen about fetching another tray of ice-cubes ("The key to a martini is a pitcher *full* of ice"), did Mr. Noble lean toward Marie and say, "Right."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You were." And Mr. Noble was silent again until MacDonald brought around the tray of drinks, when he shook his head and said, "Sherry?"

"Sure," said Doreen. "There's sherry in the kitchen. Nothing special, mostly for cooking, but —"

"Okay," said Mr. Noble.

MacDonald whispered to Doreen as she left, and she returned with a water glass, the sherry bottle, and a puzzled but resolute hostess-look. Marie watched Mr. Noble's white hand fill the water glass. "*You were right.*" What did he know? Why had MacDonald brought him?

The doorbell rang again, and this time it was Luther. He kissed Doreen, a little less casually than one usually kisses a fiancée before strangers, and then he was moving in on Marie with a cousinly gleam. *If he tries to kiss me . . .*, she thought in sudden terror.

And Mr. Noble looked up from his water glass of sherry to say flatly, "Peabody."

Luther Peabody looked expectantly at Doreen. He started to say "Introduce me, dar —" and then he looked at Mr. Noble again. Lieutenant MacDonald had retired to the bar. He was smiling. Peabody stared at the bony white face as if trying to clothe it with flesh and color.

"Lieutenant Noble," he said suddenly. It was not the voice with which he spoke to women.

"Ex," said Mr. Noble. "Out of the profession now. But not you, eh, Peabody? Still in the same line of work?"

"Doreen!" Luther Peabody's voice had regained its vigor, and a new dignity as well. "What is the meaning of this — this absurd confrontation scene? It's true that many years ago Lieutenant Noble, presumably in order to advance his own police career, chose to hound me as a murderer because of the accidental death of my first wife. It's a matter of public record that I was acquitted. I stand

proved innocent by the courts. Why should this tragedy of my youth —?"

Marie could hardly believe it, but she would have sworn that Doreen was on the verge of laughter. Mr. Noble kept looking at Luther, but his bright blue eyes glazed over as though something was going on behind them. "Phoenix," he said. "1932. Same 'accident' — fall from stepladder. Same double-indemnity policy. Not enough evidence. No indictment."

"You see?" Peabody protested. "Another unfortunate —"

"Santa Fe. 1935. Same accident. Same policy. Acquitted. Seattle. 1938." He nodded toward Marie. "Same accident. No policy. Didn't need it; family fortune. Three trials. Three hung juries. State dropped the case. Long gap; Seattle very profitable. Butte. 1945. Same accident. Woman lived. Refused to prosecute, but got divorce. Las Vegas. 1949. Acquitted."

"You left out the funny one, Nick," MacDonald contributed. "Berkeley, 1947. Convicted, served 60 days for molesting. He went and clipped a hunk of hair off a woman he was a-courting, and she didn't like it."

"Fernandez," said Mr. Noble obscurely.

"I trust you appreciate the allusion, Mr. Peabody? Your colleague Raymond Fernandez, New York's 1949 Lonely Hearts killer, who also liked hair. He used it for sympathetic magic, but fetichism may have entered in. Which is it with you, incidentally? Some of the other victims showed signs of amateur barbering."

"Are you comparing *me*, sir, to such a brute as Fernandez?"

"On second thought," MacDonald mused quietly, "I withdraw the fetichism with him; brutes are more direct. Magic was undoubtedly his dominant motive. Now your true fetichist is usually to all appearances a fine plausible citizen. You'll agree, Nick, that we've insulted Mr. Peabody needlessly? He and Fernandez have markedly different attitudes toward hair, if not toward . . ." He left the sentence incomplete.

Marie held her breath, watching Doreen. Her cousin was still looking at Luther Peabody — not with fear and hatred, not with inextinguishable love, but now quite unmistakably with repressed laughter.

"Lieutenant MacDonald!" Luther exploded with seemly rage. "Your ex-colleague may well be irresponsible and I suspect that he is more than a little drunk" (Mr. Noble calmly refilled his water glass) "but you're an officer of the law. You know that the law has no charges to bring against me and that your imputations are slanderous. This is not my house. It's my fiancée's. I'll leave it to her to order you and your sherry-tippling friend from the premises."

Now Doreen's laughter burst out, clear and ringing. "*Dar*ling! You're so cute when you're stuffy."

She was the only unamazed person in the room.

"Look, Mac," she went on. "I've

known this all along. I remember the news stories and the pictures. That's why I first went out with Luther. I thought it'd be fun to see what a real, live, unconvicted professional Bluebeard was like. Then I got to know him, and I like him, and he doesn't need to do any explaining to me. He's going to tell me they *were* all accidents and that he's a persecuted victim of fate — and he doesn't need to, because I'm saying it first and I'm saying it to you, Mac, and to you, Mr. Noble. And I'm not ordering anybody out of any doors, but . . . do you really think there's much point in staying?"

"But why, Doreen? For heaven's sake, *why?*"

The girls were going to bed early. Even Luther Peabody had seemed disconcerted by Doreen's reaction and had left soon after. ("I want to be alone, my dear, with this precious trust you have placed in my hands.")

"I told you, darling. I like him. Maybe I even believe him."

"But you *can't!* It can't all be just innocent coincidence. It piles up too much. And that funny thing about the hair . . ."

"That," Doreen admitted, patting her long straight hair, "might give a girl to think. But honest, he hasn't made any passes at my hair. No fetichism about *him.*"

Marie picked up the small book from the night-table. It was a WAC textbook on judo for women. "So you believe him?"

"All right, so there's a 5 per cent chance I'm wrong. A girl should be able to defend herself, I always say. If she wants to."

"Is that it? You *don't* want to? Are things so bad you're deliberately looking for . . .?"

Doreen lit a cigarette. "I'm sorry. I don't need your wholesome Utah sympathy, thank you kindly. Doreen can look out for herself. And I'm *not* deliberately plunging to my death. Now will you go to sleep or am I going to have to go out and see what twenty-year-old wonders the TV's offering tonight?"

"May I ask you one question, Doreen?"

"Make it a bargain. One apiece. Something I want to say to you, too . . . You first."

"Has he . . . has he talked to you about insurance?"

"Of course. It's sensible, isn't it? He's better off than you seem to think, you know, and I'm young and healthy so the premiums are low. He's paid the first premium on a policy for me. One hundred grand. And now that your worst fears are confirmed—"

"Oh, Doreen! How *can* you?"

"I've a favor to ask of you. Don't go back to the seagulls and the Tabernacle yet. Stick around a while. We'll find you a job if you want; I've got contacts."

"Then you *do* think you need somebody to —"

"I said I believed him, didn't I? It's just . . . Well . . . Oh, skip it! Go home if you want to. Go marry a

Fundamentalist and run off to the Arizona Strip. Luther marries 'em only one at a time — and when he marries me, he's going to stay married."

"I'll stay. Of course I'll stay, Doreen. But oh . . . You're not just my cousin. You've always been my best friend. And now . . . I just don't understand you at all."

"That is news?" Doreen asked, and switched off the light.

It was a small tasteful wedding, held in the Sma' Kirk O' the Braes, and chiefly distinguished by the fact that the maid of honor never met the eyes of the bridegroom.

Throughout the service Marie could not help thinking of what marriage meant to her, or rather what she hoped it might mean. And here were Doreen and Luther. . . .

"Why? *Why?*" She was almost in tears as MacDonald helped her into his car after the bridal couple had left for a Palm Springs weekend.

"We're going," MacDonald said, "to see the best man on *Whys* in L.A. You've met him, though it wasn't one of his more brilliant appearances. That's the second time Luther Peabody's bested him, and if I thought Nick was capable of such a human reaction, I'd say it rankles."

"Who *is* he, Mac? That whole scene was so strange . . ."

As they drove to downtown Los Angeles, MacDonald sketched a little of the career of Nicholas Joffe Noble, ex-Lieutenant, L.A.P.D. How the brightest Homicide man in Los Angeles had been framed to take the rap for a crooked Captain under investigation; how the sudden loss of job and reputation at the beginning of the depression had meant no money for an operation for his wife; how her death had broken him until he wound up on Skid Row living on sherry . . . and puzzles.

"Ten years ago," MacDonald said, "on my first case, one of the old-line Homicide boys steered me to him. Called him the Screwball Division, L.A.P.D. If a case makes no sense at all — and Lord knows that one didn't! — feed the facts to Nick Noble. His eyes sort of glaze over and something goes *tick* inside . . . and then the facts make a pattern.

"I've told him a lot about Doreen. He's been looking up some more stuff on Peabody. especially the Seattle case. Way I see it, we've got two problems here: Why is Doreen deliberately marrying a presumable mass murderer, and how in God's name are we going to prevent another 'accident'? And if those questions have an answer, we'll find it in the Chula Negra café, third booth on the left."

The little Mexican café was on North Main Street, near the new Federal Building, and the old Plaza and the medium-new Union Station, and the old Mexican Church and the new freeway which had brought them downtown. It had a new jukebox with some very old records and cheap new sherry in cracked old glasses.

In the third booth on the left the white little man sat, a half-full glass before him. He said "Mac" to MacDonald and "Miss Arlen" to Marie and then he brushed his white hand across his sharp-pointed white nose. "Fly," he said. "Stays there."

There was no fly. Marie looked down, embarrassed, and said, "Lieutenant MacDonald thought maybe you could —"

"Heard Mac's story," Mr. Noble interrupted. "Need yours. Talk."

And while MacDonald beckoned the plump young Mexican waitress and ordered more sherry, Marie talked. When she had finished, she watched the bright blue eyes expectantly. But they didn't glaze. Instead Mr. Noble shook his head, half in annoyance, half perhaps to dislodge the persistent if invisible fly.

"Not enough," he said. "No pattern."

"A whodunit's one thing," said MacDonald. "This is a *why*dunit. Why should a girl deliberately marry a Bluebeard? F. Tennyson Jesse works out quite an elaborate and convincing theory of murderees, people who deliberately invite being murdered."

"But Doreen isn't at all like that!" Marie protested.

"I know. Miss Jesse'd agree; Doreen doesn't fit the type. Some women want morbid sensation and pick out low, often strange kinds of men."

Marie said hesitantly: "You read about people being hypnotized. Luther does have such queer eyes —"

"Tabloid stuff," said Noble. "She knows what she's doing. Not enough. No pattern." He emptied his glass.

"And there's no official action we can take to protect her," said MacDonald. "That's the frustrating part. We can't go spending the taxpayer's money without a complaint. The insurance company's just as helpless. Dan Rafetti from Southwest National was in to see me today. He wanted some notes on Peabody to show Southwest's lawyers, but he wasn't hopeful. They can't dictate the policyholder's choice of beneficiary. All they can do is stop payment — when it's too late."

Slowly Marie rose from the table. "It was very nice of you to bring me here, Mr. MacDonald." She hoped her voice seemed under control. "And it was very silly of me to think you and your friend could pass a miracle. I did think you, at least, as an officer, might protect her."

"Wait a minute, Marie!" MacDonald was on his feet, too.

"It's all right, Mr. MacDonald. I can get home. At least if — *when* Doreen gets back from Palm Springs, I'll be there to —"

"You?" Noble's voice was sharp and dry. "You staying there with them? After marriage?"

"Why, yes. Doreen asked me to."

"Tell," he commanded.

Hesitantly she sat down and told. The blue eyes faded and thought seemed to recede behind them. Suddenly he nodded and said to MacDonald, "Recap M. O."

"Peabody's *modus operandi?* It's

stayed the same as in your case. Apparently a mild dose of sleeping pills, then when the woman's unconscious a sharp blow to the base of the skull with the edge of the hand. Defense is always a broken neck by accident while under the influence of a slight self-administered overdose: Almost impossible to disprove."

The eyes glazed again. When their light returned it was almost painfully bright. "Pattern clear," he said. "Obvious *why*. But proof . . . Now listen. Both of you."

The cute plump waitress refilled the water glass uninstructed.

Doreen and Luther had been back from Palm Springs for two days now, and the honeymoon was figuratively as well as literally over.

How could she go on living here? Marie thought. Even to save Doreen. But Mac and Nick Noble said it would be only a matter of days . . . Marie squirmed back into the corner where Mac had first found her and tried to cut herself off from the quarrel that raged.

"But it's only plain damn common horse sense, Luther!" Doreen was screaming. "We have the good luck that Marie's going around with a cop and he lets slip that they're reopening that Seattle case. Are you just going to sit around and wait for them to extradite you?"

Luther Peabody's tone was too imperturbable to be called a shout, but it matched Doreen's in volume. "The Seattle D. A. would be an idiot to reopen the case. I was acquitted —"

"You weren't! They were hung juries. They can try you again and I won't let them!"

"Very well. I wasn't acquitted. But I was released three times. They can't convict me. I'm comfortable here, thank you, and I'm staying."

"I *won't* be the wife of a man on trial for murder! We'll go some place — any place — slip away — use another name for just a little while — just to let it get cold again —"

"My dear Doreen, I am staying."

"And I know why, too! That filthy-rich tin heiress from Bolivia we met at Palm Springs! I see myself getting you out of town while she's here. You'd sooner stay and be indicted or extradited or whatever it is and have all the scandal! What about my career?"

"You won't mind, my dear, if I ask, 'What career?' "

And after that, Marie thought wryly. it began to get nasty. And the plan wasn't working. The Seattle rumor was supposed to make Luther eager to get out, put time-pressure on him. Mac was taking a week's vacation, switching schedules with some other Lieutenant, so that he could act privately. He and a detective he'd hired were taking turns watching the house. And if Marie observed the faintest sign of anything wrong, she was to make a signal . . . What was the signal? She was so sleepy . . .

The newlyweds had stormed off to separate rooms. They had even

stopped shouting across the house to each other. She was so sleepy, but it was so much trouble to get to her bed . . .

Marie managed to dig her fingers into her thigh so viciously that her eyes opened. "The faintest sign of anything wrong . . ." Of course. The first thing he'd do would be to drug the watchdog. He'd brought her the cup of cocoa Doreen had fixed. She had to make the signal . . . the signal . . .

She would be black-and-blue for weeks, but she kept digging into her thigh. Doreen insisted on keeping the Venetian blinds throughout the house with their slats slanted *up*, so sunlight couldn't come through to fade the carpeting. If MacDonald saw any window with the slats slanting *down* . . .

She heard the gratifying rattle of the shifting vanes as her hand slipped loosely from the cord and her eyes closed.

"You was supposed to relieve me an hour ago," said the man from the O'Breen Agency reproachfully.

"I know," MacDonald snapped. "I'm on vacation, but that doesn't stop a Homicide Captain from calling me down to Headquarters for more details on a report I filed last month. — What's that!"

"Yeah, I was just gonna tell you, Lieutenant. That blind switched damn near an hour ago. I didn't phone you because I figured you was on your way here, and you don't see me risking my license trying to break in —"

But MacDonald was already at the door. He had no more authority to break in than the operative; but he had self-confidence, a marked lack of desire to warn the murderer by ringing a bell, and a lock-gun. The operative followed hesitantly at his heels. They both stopped short at the archway from hall to living room.

With the blinds as Doreen liked them, the room would have been dark, but the moon shone down through the reversed slats of the warning-blind onto the body. It was chicly dressed, as any starlet should be, in a fur-trimmed dressing gown. Its face was painted to starlet-mannequin perfection and the moon gleamed back from a starlet's overpainted fingernails. But one item differed from starlet standards: the coiffure.

The hair was so close-cropped that the head seemed almost bald.

MacDonald had switched the lights on and was bending over the body. "She's breathing!" he yelled. "We got a break! Phone —" And in a moment he was through to Homicide, arranging for official reinforcements, an immediate ambulance, and the nearest patrol car in the meantime.

He set back the phone and looked up at a strange tableau. In the front arch stood the private operative, gun drawn, face questioning. In the other arch, leading to the bedrooms, stood Luther Peabody, staring at the unconscious girl on the floor.

"All right, lover-boy," MacDonald began, not unglad that his position was, at the moment, unofficial. "My

man has you covered. You're not trying a thing — not any more. And before the regulars get here, you're going to tell me a few fascinating items — starting with '*Where's Marie?*' "

"I don't understand," Peabody faltered. "I heard all this noise . . ." His eyes never left the body.

MacDonald hesitated. The man worried him. He *did* look as if he had just awakened from a sound sleep. And what was stranger: the gaze he fixed on the body seemed (unless he were the world's leading non-professional actor) to be one of absolute incredulous surprise.

Then a moan came from the floor that sounded almost like words, almost like "Did I . . ." MacDonald knelt and bent closer, still eying Peabody. "Did I . . . did I fix the slats right, Mac?" said the preposterous starlet-lips.

"Marie!" MacDonald gasped. "Then who —" Abruptly he rose as he saw a uniformed patrol-car man looming behind the operative. "MacDonald, Homicide," he said, moving forward with his open wallet extended. "The girl's alive — ambulance on the way."

The patrol-car man said, "We spotted a dame high-tailing it away from here, took a chance on picking her up. Bring her in, Clarence!"

And 200 pounds of Clarence brought in a scratching, biting fury who was unmistakably Doreen Arlen Peabody.

"Didn't mean to be cryptic. Honest," said Nick Noble, brushing away the fly. "Thought you saw pattern. Seattle time-pressure wouldn't pressure Peabody. Be *less* apt to act when under observation. *Would* pressure Doreen. Had to act while she still had him around."

"The hospital says Marie'll be out tomorrow. Nothing serious. Doreen was a failure even at learning judo blows out of handbooks. But if I'm going to shine as Marie's savior, I'd better at least get completely straight what the devil happened. Want to help me sort it out?"

"No sorting. Straight pattern. Clear as soon as I knew Marie was staying on with them. Then all fell into place: Only possible *why*. Failure. Insurance. Family. Judo. Hair. Above all, hair."

"OK. Let *me* try. Doreen's not talking. We're going to have to release her anyway. You can't charge attempted murder when the victim won't make a complaint; and Marie says think what it'd do to the family in Utah."

"Step-family," said Nick Noble.

"Yes, that's a key-point. With all Doreen's publicity, you think of this vast Family; but Marie's her only blood-relative. That made the whole scheme possible. And the most cold-blooded — But let me try to reconstruct:

"Doreen meets Peabody. She remembers a little, checks up and learns more. Maybe she thinks, 'He can't get away with it forever' — and from that comes the thought: 'If any murder happens with him around, he's *it*.' "

"*Why*," said Nick Noble.

"Exactly. The only possible *why* for deliberately marrying a mass murderer: to have the perfect scapegoat for the murder you're about to commit. She brings her cousin out here. They used to look a lot alike; really the main differences, speech and action aside, are Doreen's elaborate starlet-makeup and Marie's wavy hair. So Doreen insures herself for an enormous amount, or maybe just lets Peabody do it, if that's what *he* has in mind. But Doreen's not worrying — She'll kill Marie, using Peabody's M. O. and putting her own clothes and makeup on the body. There's still the hair. Well, Peabody has a psychopathic quirk about hair. He's clipped tresses from his victims before. This time she'll make it seem he's gone hog-wild and cut off too much . . . too much to tell if it was straight or wavy. Meanwhile she'll scrub her face, use the lightest makeup, wear Marie's clothes, and wave her hair. She'll be the little cousin from Utah. It's her background, too; she was once very like Marie even in actions — it'll be a simple role.

"So Peabody is convicted of the murder of his wife. Maybe even as the Utah cousin she's going to be an eyewitness. It doesn't matter whether he's gassed or found insane. In any case the insurance company won't pay *him*. Policy reverts to the estate, which consists solely of the Utah cousin, who now has a hundred grand in cash and never goes back. Perfect!"

"She thinks."

MacDonald nodded. "She thinks. . . . You know, Nick, unofficial head that you are of the Screwball Division, L.A.P.D., this was the ideally screwball case for you. Exact illustration of the difference between a professional and an amateur. If Peabody had killed Doreen, the motive and what you call the *pattern* would have been completely obvious; and yet he'd probably have executed the details so well that the worst he'd get would be another hung jury. Now Doreen had worked out the damnedest most unlikely pattern conceivable; but if (God forbid!) she'd brought off her murder, I swear she'd have gone straight to the gas chamber. Doreen wasn't really good at anything, from acting to murder. Somewhere along the line, pure ordinary police routine would've caught up with the identification —"

"Radiation Lab," said Nick Noble.

"Of course. Marie's prints would be on file if she'd worked on such a security job. Then the hair: Doreen was giving herself a quicky fingerwave when she heard me rampaging around and panicked. I suppose later she'd have had a pro job done — and that'd be one more witness. Fake identity plus good old *cui bono?* and she's done for. All thought out in advance . . . except what happens next."

"Rouse," Nick Noble agreed.

"Exactly. The English 'blazing car' murderer back around the time of Peabody's debut. Everything brilliantly worked out up through the

murder . . . then chaos. Arrested the day after the killing and executed four months later. Doreen would've gone that way too. But thanks to you —"

"What now?" Nick Noble asked as Rosario brought fresh glasses.

"Damned if I know. Maybe your pattern machine can figure it. She says she's going back to Peabody if he'll have her. Says she kind of likes him. Well, Marie didn't! Marie hated him from the start —"

"— and didn't hate you?" It was the first time MacDonald had ever seen a broad grin on that thin white face. "A little like Martha, Mac," said Nick Noble. "A little."

MacDonald remembered Martha Noble's tragic operation. "Luckier," he said. "Thanks to you." He rose, embarrassed. "I'll bring Marie around tomorrow. Want you to see her while she's still all shaven and shorn. She's lovely — it's an experience. Well," he concluded, "it's been a hell of a murder case, hasn't it? The murder case with no murder and no arrest. Files closed with nobody in prison and nobody dead."

"That's bad?" Nick Noble observed to his invisible insect.

NEXT MONTH . . .

Reader Contest:

An untitled story by de Maupassant — $100 for the best title!

ten fine tales of detection and crime, including:

T. S. Stribling's THE MYSTERY OF THE FIVE MONEY ORDERS

A. A. Milne's MURDER AT ELEVEN

Julia Peterkin's ASHES

Eden Phillpotts's PETERS, DETECTIVE

Michael Gilbert's THE NEAT MAN

plus Black Mask section:

Cornell Woolrich's THE LAST BUS HOME

WINNER OF A SPECIAL AWARD

It has been said that the art of conversation is dead. William March, the distinguished author of COMPANY K, THE LITTLE WIFE, *and most recently,* OCTOBER ISLAND, *obviously does not agree. Like Mark Twain, under similar circumstances, he believes that the reports of the death have been greatly exaggerated. And to prove his contention, Mr. March has the host in his story relate the facts of an "impossible crime" to a group of interesting and interested listeners, consisting of a poetess, a lawyer, a woman psychiatrist, and a publisher. The result is an off-trail story, rich in detail, poetic, and thought-provoking. While the conversation revolves about a dead man, the conversation itself is never dead; you will find it, as is true in every art, both stimulating and imaginative.*

The "impossible crime" is not a figment of William March's fancy. It is a crime that actually occurred, and Mr. March has followed the real-life tragedy with almost perfect fidelity. The victim was exactly the kind of person Mr. March describes: "an illiterate, obscure, terrified, eccentric little laundryman who lived alone and who had known almost nobody." Mr. March has named him Emmanuel Vogel and said he was born in a small village in Poland; actually, the victim was named Isadore Fink and was born in a small town in Galicia. All the other details are the same as in the true-life case, including the fact that the police were never able to penetrate the mystery. Mr. March's characters offer three solutions — one fantastic, one poetic, and one so realistic that it might have satisfied the police themselves. If none convinces you, perhaps you would like to try your own hand at real-life detecting. But we warn you that the mystery of the fabulous laundryman is one of the most baffling unsolved murders in the annals of New York City crime . . .

And that reminds us: Mr. March is not the only famous author who has used the Isadore Fink case as the springboard for a short story. Ben Hecht gave it a dizzy whirl in his short story titled "The Mystery of the Fabulous Laundryman," included in his book, ACTOR'S BLOOD *(1936). Originally it was our intention to give you both stories, back to back — a sort of double detective entry — so that you could see how two eminent craftsmen started with precisely the same facts, yet finished light-years apart. However, unexpected production difficulties prevented us from conducting this experiment; but we shall bring you the Hecht version soon.*

THE BIRD HOUSE

by WILLIAM MARCH

IT WAS NEAR SUNSET, AND THEY SAT in front of the wide, recessed window that overlooked the park, their drinks arranged on tables beside them. Outside, the red-brick building was covered with lush vines of a peculiar brilliance. They thickened the ledges and the ornate, old-fashioned balconies over which they grew, and so outlined the window itself with dense, translucent foliage that the effect of the small park, seen through it, was the effect of green in an easel of brighter green. Marcella Crosby called attention to the window and the park at once. "Look!" she cried out with soft excitement. "It's like a landscape framed in a florist's wreath!"

She felt warmth in her stomach, a nervous tightening at the base of her neck, and she took a strand of her straight, black hair and brushed it across her lips, nibbling the ends thoughtfully. This was the beginning of a new poem, and she knew that well. She did not, as yet, know precisely what the poem would be, what emotional direction it would take, but she felt that somehow it would concern an old man who, achieving resurrection in his grave, broke through the earth with his hands and sat up in amazement among the stiff floral tributes that others had placed above him.

The idea so excited her that she spoke her thoughts aloud: Most of us see death, when we see it at all, through the long, optimistic window of life, she said; but in her poem the convention would be reversed, for her hero would look forward toward life from the grave, through the most terrible and perhaps truest window of all — the foolish, arranged elegance of a funeral wreath.

The Filipino houseboy came up with a cocktail pitcher. When he had filled the glasses, the guests were silent for a time, staring indolently at the park and the tall buildings beyond. Inside the park, between a flowering syringa and the starched laciness of a ginkgo tree, was a bird house atop a green pole. It was new and elaborate, and it rose upward in setback levels, like the scaled down model of an ancient temple. There were circular holes in each tier, designed so precisely for size that while a bird no larger than a wren could easily enter and find sanctuary, its enemies, because of the very bulk that made them dangerous, were turned back finally, and defeated.

Dr. Hilde Flugelmann gestured with her cigarette holder and said in her ingratiating, foreign voice, "It was not the window that caught my eye: it was the little white bird house." She smiled and inclined her head, exposing obliquely the pink gums above her small, seed-like teeth. "I think the security of the bird

house impressed me because I see terror, terror, terror all day long in the poor, insecure minds of my patients. Why, only a moment ago I was thinking to myself that no matter how vulnerable we are, at least the birds are somewhat safe."

For a time they all talked at once, contrasting the security of animals with the security humans know, but at length they turned to Walter Nation, as if some law of courtesy permitted the host the flattery of the final opinion; but he merely sighed and said that all the talk about funeral wreaths and bird houses had put him in mind of a laundryman who had been murdered a few years before. It was an affair which had always interested him, he said, for there was in it mystery, pathos, terror, suspense, and even a touch of that baffling, artistic senselessness which is found in all truly memorable crimes.

He hesitated and glanced expectantly at his guests, but when they said they were not familiar with the case and asked him to tell it to them, he continued: "It happened here in New York, in Harlem to be exact, and the name of the murdered man was Emmanuel Vogel. But let me begin at the beginning, and tell you some of the things the police found out in the course of their investigation: Emmanuel was born in a small Polish village. I've never seen the place, of course, but I've always thought of it as one of those communities Chekhov describes so well: a village consisting of a general store and a collection of houses, surrounded in winter by the traditional sea of mud."

He took a cigarette from a box at his elbow, lighted it, and went on with his story. Emmanuel's father, he explained, had been a poor peddler who went about the countryside with a pack strapped to his back; his mother had been the local laundress. She was a frail woman, and when her son could barely walk, he was already helping her at the washtub. She died when he was seven. Afterwards, he had washed, cooked, and scrubbed for his father, just as she had done; he had even carried on her laundry business as best he could; but three years later his father died too, and he was entirely alone in the little town.

"Oh, I know that place so well," said Dr. Flugelmann. "I have seen it, or its counterpart, many times. At the edge of the village there was an old factory with a rusting iron roof. There was a market place where the farmers came to trade, and about a mile in the distance, set in a grove of handsome trees, was the big house where the local nobility lived." She shook her head, sighed, and continued: "I see Emmanuel so plainly at this instant: I see him delivering a parcel of laundry in a basket almost too big for him to manage, and as he moves down the street, away from his home, he glances back over his shoulder. He has rust-colored hair, a long neck, and a big, jutting nose. I think he cracks his knuckles when he's nervous, and

as he waits at the door for the money he's earned, he presses his palms together, or, twists one leg anxiously about the other."

"My clearest picture of him is in his home, immediately after his father's funeral," said Marcella Crosby. "He is wearing a ridiculous little black hat: something hard like a derby, but with a very low crown, with mourning crepe sewed over the original band. His suit is too short and too tight for him. He is walking up and down, trying to control his grief, but suddenly he gives in, rests his face against his mother's old washtub, and cries." She brushed back her hair, closed her eyes for concentration, and continued, "He must have felt terror at that moment, knowing he was alone in a world he feared, and which despised him, and a little later, I think he ran to the doors and windows and locked them all securely."

Mr. Nation inhaled, sat farther back in his chair, and said he considered the fantasy of the locking of the doors and windows a most interesting one. Perhaps it really had happened that way; perhaps it was the beginning of Emmanuel's preoccupation with locks and bolts and bars which was, some years later on, to baffle the police so greatly. He crushed his cigarette with a slow, scrubbing motion, and went on with his story:

It seemed that following his father's death, Emmanuel was not only alone, but homeless too, and at once a pathetic, itinerant existence had begun for him, for he became a sort of housewife's helper who rarely spent more than a day or two in any one place: a kind of rustic menial who moved from villager to villager, from farmer to farmer, doing the domestic work required of him in return for his food, his temporary bed, and perhaps even a few coins on occasion. He cooked, he scrubbed, he mended, he baked for his employers — but washing was the thing he did best, and that was the task he was usually called on to do.

But Mr. Nation did not want his listeners to think of Emmanuel as being without ambition during those years. If they did think so, they would be misled, for actually the child had had a positive, if somewhat modest goal that never wavered, and that was to come to America and eventually own a laundry of his own. His task was a difficult one, and to achieve his purpose he had led a life of hysterical penury and deprivation; nevertheless, he had his passage money eventually, and a little besides, and when he was twenty years old he landed triumphantly in New York.

Being a laundryman, he had gone at once to work in a laundry. It was a small establishment, located somewhere on the lower east side, and for the next few years, according to the material the police gathered after his death, he had put in long hours at his washtub, or bending above his ironing board. He had lived entirely to himself, but if the timidity of his temperament had prevented his

having friends, it had served equally well to preclude his making enemies. The only relaxation he had had was smoking, and Mr. Nation felt he must make this point sooner or later, since the buying of a pack of cigarettes had figured in his murder.

People who had known him in those years described him as a thin, hairy, shy, eccentric little man with a delicate constitution; and while Mr. Nation found it possible to believe almost anything he had heard about Emmanuel Vogel, he could not bring himself to credit the reports of his physical frailness, since all his life he had performed, as a matter of course, work which would have caused the average, healthy dray-horse to stagger and collapse in the streets.

John Littleton, the lawyer, said: "I know he got his own laundry sooner or later. The question is, how long did it take?"

"It took ten years," continued Mr. Nation. "By that time he'd saved a thousand dollars, and had already found a ground-floor location in Harlem where he hoped to prosper."

In the rear of the living-room, which was already becoming a little dusky, the Filipino houseboy was stuffing broiled mushroom caps with a mixture of crab and lobster meat. He listened with pride to the conversation, smiling and nodding wisely each time Mr. Nation made a point. It was his opinion that his employer was not aggressive enough, that too often he permitted his inferiors to dominate a conversation.

The houseboy placed the mushrooms on circular pieces of thin toast, and added to each a portion of a golden-brown, spiced sauce which he had perfected himself. When he first had come to work for Mr. Nation, he sometimes would put down his tray, rub his hands together, and laugh boisterously at his employer's witty remarks, rolling his eyes and glancing seductively at the guests, as if urging them to appreciate and applaud too; but Mr. Nation had told him finally that such partisanship, while heart-warming and most flattering, was not entirely in keeping with the stricter usages of good form, and he had had to give it up. Now he arranged the mushrooms on a silver platter and moved silently toward the guests, his teeth white and gleaming, and at that instant Mr. Nation was saying:

"It's necessary for me to describe the new place in detail, I'm afraid. Well, to begin with, there was a large front room that faced on the street; behind it, there were two smaller connecting rooms that opened onto a tenement hallway. The one window in the main room looked out on a narrow courtyard at the side. — Have I made myself clear? Do you visualize the layout of Emmanuel's laundry?"

The guests said they did, and he went on: "After taking the place, Emmanuel's first move was to rent the two smaller rooms to an old colored woman who lived alone, and who was content to mind her own business. When the deal between them was made, the connecting door

was locked and bolted from the laundry side, but not being satisfied with that, Emmanuel had it nailed securely. He had iron bars put across the window that faced the court, bars so close together that not even a sparrow hawk could have got through them. Afterwards, he had two extra locks and a heavy chain put on the street door, and as a further precaution, the workmen added a strong iron bolt — all, you understand, on the inside."

John Littleton selected a mushroom, bit into it, swallowed, and said, "He'd already invested his capital, so he couldn't have had much loose cash lying around at the time. Then what was he trying to protect? What did he really have to lose?"

Marcella Crosby sat forward excitedly in her chair. It was axiomatic, she said, that those who have the least must guard it the most faithfully. She pointed out that when we love and are loved in return, we leave our riches unguarded for all to accept or destroy; but when love is gone, we see, at last, what has slipped through our fingers, and struggle to keep what we no longer possess.

When we are young and full of life, and have health in profusion, we consider those things our peculiar right, and accept them without gratitude. While we have our treasure, we give no thought to it, as if our very indifference to the things we have in abundance were our assurance they would last forever; but when we are old and ailing, and life has become nagging, painful, and hardly worth keeping, we discover, at length, that it is too precious to be given up, and make the most elaborate efforts to preserve it, to hold on to the unprofitable days we have left.

Marcella confessed that the fable of the barn door and the missing horse had always interested her, not because of its innate truth, but because of its sly, ingenuous falsity. To be accurate, to accord with the perverse nature of man's mind, the moral should be reversed to warn us all that there's no use locking the barn door until we know for certain that the horse is actually gone.

Her voice grew self-conscious, hesitated, and died away.

Phil Cottman, who published her work, who advertised her as the greatest mystic poet since William Blake, and who was embarrassed by her imagery until it was safely between the covers of one of her volumes, looked down at the rug and said, "Perhaps Emmanuel had accumulated more money than the price of his laundry, and the extra cash was hidden somewhere about the place. If that's true, then his precautions were sensible enough."

Outside, the park was now bathed in the soft, full light of the sun, and Dr. Flugelmann, observing it in silence, her eyes half closed and a little sad, waved suddenly in the direction of the bird house and said, "Oh, no, no! It wasn't anything definite, anything real, he feared. The laundry with its locks and bolts and bars was

only his little white bird house where he hoped to be safe. Oh, I know the type so well, and have had them in treatment many times. Always, they have a sense of their own doom: they fear they will be robbed, they fear they will be murdered, they fear, beyond the next building, there lurks some terror for them alone."

She turned to Walter Nation, asking him if Emmanuel had expressed his anxieties to others, and if they were now part of the record of his death; but he said that he did not know. A moment later he went on with the details of Emmanuel's life in the new neighborhood. During the months he had lived there, he had not once gone out of the small area from which he drew his living. He had had no assistants. He had continued to work long hours, longer than ever, now that he was laboring for himself alone. He was never known to go to the theater, or even to the movies. He did not read. He did not drink or gamble. He did not have a friend with whom he could talk, or to whom he could confide his ambitions or his fears. He had no sweetheart.

And so Emmanuel lived for a time, and then, after delivering a parcel of laundry to a customer one night, he stopped in the cigar store across the street from his place to buy a pack of cigarettes. It was 10 o'clock at the time, and the clerk, who knew him as well as anybody, asked if he were now going to bed. Emmanuel replied that he'd like to, but could not, as he had at least two hours more work to do that night. Then the clerk watched him cross the street, unfasten his system of locks, enter his laundry, and turn on the lights. Fifteen minutes later, the clerk happened to look across the street again, and seeing the lights in the laundry go out, he said to himself, "Emmanuel didn't do his work after all." He started to turn away, to go back behind his counter, but he had an odd sense of disaster at that moment, a feeling that something was wrong across the street, and he stood irresolute inside his shop, staring at Emmanuel's door.

At about the instant the clerk had seen the lights go out, Emmanuel's tenant, the old colored woman who lived in the adjoining rooms, heard three pistol shots from the interior of the laundry. The sound alarmed her, and she went to the connecting door and called out, "Are you all right? Is everything all right in there?" But she got no answer, and she hurried through the door of the tenement house and onto the sidewalk, bumping into a policeman who was passing. What she told the policeman as she disengaged herself was not known, but the chances were she did not say that she had heard three shots. If she did tell him that, then his assumption that he was dealing with a routine suicide seemed, in Mr. Nation's opinion, almost incredible.

"She was excited at the time," said John Littleton. "Maybe she jumped at the conclusion, and simply told the cop that the laundryman had

shot himself. Maybe the cop accepted her theory without question."

Mr. Nation considered this explanation logical. At any rate, neither the policeman nor the old woman had thought murder a possibility as they approached the laundry door. "All this had taken only a minute or so, but already a crowd had gathered, and when the policeman found the door locked, and realized he couldn't get in without breaking it down, he thought of the transom. There was a small boy in the crowd, so the policeman lifted the boy onto his shoulders, and told him to crawl through the transom and open the door from the inside; but the boy found out soon enough that Emmanuel had thought of the transom too, and that it was nailed shut. Then the policeman handed the boy his club, and told him to break the glass with it. The boy did so, and lowered himself into the room. Almost at once the group outside heard him fumbling at the locks and bolts, but he solved them all at last, and the door swung open upon the most beguiling mystery of our time."

The telephone rang just then, and Mr. Nation lifted the receiver. When he replaced it, he went on to say that, in the long, precise wedge of brightness from the policeman's flashlight, Emmanuel Vogel was seen lying in the center of his room, rapidly bleeding to death. There was an expression of horror on his face, as if what he had feared in secret had come true at last, and as the policeman and the crowd watched him, the arm that had rested against his thigh twitched, relaxed slowly, and slid forward to the floor. He moved his lips three times, as if trying to speak, then shuddered and slumped somehow from within. His eyes opened and fixed themselves on the ceiling in the patient, impersonal stare of death, and the obsessed purpose of his harried and insipid life was now fulfilled.

The first thing the policeman noticed was that there was no gun near the body; the next was that the victim had been shot three times — twice in the head, once through the right hand. When the significance of these facts became clear to him, he told one of the people outside to call police headquarters and report a homicide. Then he pushed back the crowd and bolted the door again. He found the light switch and snapped it on, moving forward with nervous caution. He was convinced, at that time, that the murderer was still in the room, but he searched it thoroughly, and there was nobody there. When he couldn't discoverer the murderer, he determined, at least, to locate the weapon the murderer had used; but he couldn't find the gun either.

By that time the ambulance and the police cars had arrived, and at once the medical examiner settled the question of how Emmanuel had died: he had been shot from a distance of several feet, by a revolver held level with his head. It was murder, he said; it couldn't possibly be anything else. At once the room was filled with

specialists testing, measuring, photographing, examining, and asking questions. They found the one window closed, and latched from the inside, the iron bars all in place. The connecting door was still bolted and locked from the inside, still firmly nailed shut.

When the homicide experts saw all this, they looked at one another in astonishment, and shook their heads. Then the policeman repeated his story, and the detectives again questioned the group who had been at the door when it had swung open. They verified each detail of the policeman's story: the door had most certainly been locked on the inside, they said, and after the boy opened it, absolutely nobody had come out of the room. There was no doubt in their minds on this point. They would swear to it anywhere, any time.

The homicide men had then gone back to work in earnest. If the murderer had not left the laundry, obviously he was still in it somewhere; and in the days that followed, they almost dismantled the place as they searched, but without success, for trapdoors, sliding panels, or even holes in the walls and ceiling through which a pistol could have been fired. They followed every clue, exhausted every possibility, and learned nothing. To this day, the mystery of how Emmanuel Vogel was murdered, by whom, and for what reason, was as great as it had been on the original February night of his death.

"How about the boy?" asked Phil Cottman. "He might have picked up the pistol while he was alone in the room. Did anybody think of that?"

"Yes," said Mr. Nation. "Everybody thought of it, including the cop who was first on the scene. When he saw the gun was missing, even before he shut the door again, he searched the child, but there was no gun."

He said he'd like to clear up some of the other points that might be bothering his listeners. To begin with, there were no fingerprints, no strands of hair in the victim's fist, no torn letters to be pieced together, no broken buttons — no physical clues of any sort, in fact. The laundry had not been ransacked. Everything was found to be in order, in its proper place. The glass in the barred window was quite intact, the front door elaborately secured from the inside, as everybody knew by this time. It wasn't likely the murderer could have refastened the bolts and chains after leaving the room, but even if he had been able to do so, he would not have had time. Then, too, he would have had to make himself invisible while doing it, for the cigar clerk had been watching the door from the time the lights went out until the crowd gathered. Afterwards, Emmanuel's life had been traced step by step, from the time he was born, until the time he had died. He had been no famous person in disguise; he had been no secret agent of a foreign government. He had been precisely what he appeared to be — an illiterate, obscure, terrified, eccentric little laundryman

who lived alone and who had known almost nobody.

To the west, along Madison Avenue, the cabs sped up and down in a steady, aggressive stream, their bodies flashing yellow, green, and orange in the brilliant, late afternoon light. Farther away, somewhere to the north, an ambulance clanged as it approached East River, and Dr. Flugelmann, listening tensely, as if the warning were a sound most familiar to her, pressed her plump, ringed fingers together and said, "I do not know why, but I assumed that Emmanuel would be killed by a crushing blow, something brutal and entirely primitive. Being killed by a pistol was not at all right for him."

She explained that while Mr. Nation was telling his story, she, too, had been occupied. She had been weaving a fantasy of her own, she said — a fantasy which had concerned Emmanuel and his mother's washtub. As the others no doubt remembered, he had spent his formative years above it, and when he had left his native country at last, what was clearly the most precious thing he possessed? It was the washtub, of course, and she thought it the one thing from his past that he had brought with him to America. He could not have abandoned it if he had tried, for he was tied to the tub in a way that others are tied to the ones they most love: it had become his father and mother, his sister and brother; it had even became a sort of industrious wife to him, a wife who shared his labors, and gave him security against the world he feared so much.

She went on to say that we all want security of one sort or another. It was normal and most natural to want security. But life itself was not at all secure. Life was strong and cruel, and its purpose was not peace, but conflict. If we are just secure enough, we are fortunate indeed, for then we can enjoy the wonderful things that life also has to give us; but if we become too secure, if we give up too much, then we have repudiated life itself. Who can say where the dividing line is? How can we know when we are entirely safe, or are merely not living at all?

She lowered her head with a smiling humility, as if asking pardon for being both trite and tiresome, and said gently: "And now, if you permit it, I will finish my small fantasy of the laundryman and his washtub: now, let us recall that Emmanuel's mother had washed her life away over that tub, and Emmanuel himself, although he did not realize it, perhaps, had really done the same. Then where had the essence of those lives gone? What had become of all that vitality, that energy, that strength and striving? I think the tub had absorbed it."

She turned in her chair, played with the beads about her throat, and went on with her story: she thought that after a while the assimilated lives of Emmanuel and his mother had had their effect on the ancient, wood-and-iron tub — so much so, in fact, that gradually the tub had

achieved an awareness of both its own existence and the existence of its tormentors. It had begun to feel a little too; to suffer pain in a sort of primitive, mindless way. Perhaps, during the last months of the laundryman's career, it would sometimes appear to shiver. Perhaps it would manage to slide forward on the bench, as if seeking to escape its oppressor, and Emmanuel, grasping it again with his reddened, soapy hands would sigh patiently and pull it into place once more. Perhaps the tub even resisted him on occasion, and he would feel the tension, the sudden hostility between them.

And then, one night, life itself had originated mysteriously in the tub, just as it had, with an equal mysteriousness, once originated in Emmanuel and his mother, and at that moment the tub understood the bondage the three of them had shared in common; but what it could not know was that the Vogels, being human, and as such almost indestructible, could endure easily what the tub could not. . . . All this had happened on the February night when Emmanuel had bought his cigarettes and crossed the street. Then, as he prepared to do his extra work, the tub had gathered all its strength together, had risen up, struck him, and crushed his skull.

She held her glass forward toward the window, allowing the sunlight to touch it, to bring to life the shattered pinks and greens in the crystal; then, seeing that John Littleton was about to offer an objection to her theory, she smiled and said placatingly, "I know, I know. He wasn't killed by a blow from a washtub. He was shot by a pistol. It makes my story even sillier, doesn't it?"

"Emmanuel Vogel was killed by somebody as real as any person in this room," said John Littleton, "and I think I know how it was done. Now, the first thing is to determine the motive. All right, then: Let's take the commonest motive of all — greed."

He went on to say that the frightened ask for the disaster that so often overtakes them. If Emmanuel had behaved like others, perhaps his neighbors would have thought nothing of him; but with all those bolts and locks, they must have wondered what he had so precious that he must guard it so well; then, since we can understand the minds of others only with the content of our own minds, and since the most precious thing to those who knew him was money, they all must have thought, at one time or another, that the little laundryman was rich, that his wealth was hidden somewhere in his room. Having come to this conclusion, it was only natural that one of them should decide to take the money for himself.

"Now we have a logical motive," said Mr. Littleton; "the next thing is to get the criminal inside the room. That can be done easily between the time Emmanuel left the cigar store and the time the shots were heard. Nobody knows, of course, but I think somebody just knocked on the door,

and when Emmanuel asked what he wanted, he said he'd come to pick up a bundle of laundry."

To fear indiscriminately was even more naive, in Mr. Littleton's mind, than to trust without reason. He felt that Emmanuel had so long quieted his terrors with formulas he had established for his protection that he no longer had the power to distinguish between what was dangerous and what was not. The fact that the murderer had announced his intention in a phrase entirely familiar to him, had reassured him, and he had opened the door with no misgivings at all; then, as if to protect both himself and his murderer against a world outside which menaced them equally, he had at once relocked and rebolted his door.

Perhaps the intruder had not planned to kill Emmanuel, had meant only to frighten him into giving up his money; but Emmanuel had gone to pieces when he saw the pistol and had hurled himself at the thief with that despairing, superhuman courage that only the truly timid achieve. No doubt the last thing the robber had anticipated was resistance of such heroic quality. Perhaps he had become frightened, too, and had backed away from the laundryman's hysterical grasp, firing straight at his head. Then he had hurried to the door, but before he could get the locks undone, the crowd was there waiting for him.

"You got him inside the laundry," said Phil Cottman. "Now get him through that locked and watched door — if you can."

To Mr. Littleton's way of thinking, that was the most obvious part of the mystery — so simple, in fact, that perhaps the others would not consider it a solution at all; nevertheless, he was convinced it had happened precisely in the manner he had in mind. He said he could visualize the murderer standing in the dark, his mind working coldly, as he listened to the crowd outside. He knew he was trapped, that if he tried to hide in the room he would be caught. Suddenly he had seen the only way of escape for him, had known what every sleight-of-hand artist takes for granted: that the audience would be so surprised when it saw the laundryman bleeding to death on his floor, so diverted in that first shocking moment of revelation, that no eye could possibly take in anything else.

Realizing this, he had flattened himself against the wall, as close to the door as he dared, and at the instant the door swung inward, he had thrust one foot through the opening, and had planted it on the pavement outside, swaying his body backward as the crowd pressed their bodies forward to meet him. No one had seen him, no one had paid the least attention to him, and in a second, he had ceased to be a murderer trapped in a room, and had become, instead, one of the vanguard of those citizens who sought that murderer. A little later, when the policeman shut the door in the face of the crowd, no doubt he pushed

the murderer out with the others.

Phil Cottman laughed. "That situation has its possibilities," he said. "I can see the murderer dusting off his coat where the cop had shoved him, and saying, 'Give these cops a little authority and they think they own the town. Well, I'm a citizen and taxpayer, and I'm not going to stay here any longer and be pushed around by cops!' Then the crowd opened up for him, and he walked away with the murder weapon dangling at his belt."

Marcella Crosby started to speak, but changed her mind. Instead, she sighed and stared intently through the window, her chin cupped in one thin, intense palm. Beyond the park, the buildings cast their precise, wedge-shaped shadows on one another. Two birds came back to the bird house and rested on its upper ledge, ruffling their feathers, stretching their wings to the sunlight. Seeing these things, Marcella leaned forward and touched the dense foliage that framed the window, thinking of the things she had once had, but now had lost; of the things that might have been hers, had she had the courage to take them.

In the park, the last bright rays of the sun lay everywhere as heavy as honey, and sitting quietly back in her chair, she thought: Look at the trees! They take the light, they diffuse it, they drink it up, they change it to fit their shapes, and scatter the patterns of themselves on the grass below. They lean forward to the light, to take the last of it that remains. They cannot live without light, and yet, being mindless, they do not know that light exists.

Suddenly she made a nervous, disavowing gesture and said that while neither of the solutions satisfied her entirely, she was in accord with Dr. Flugelmann's belief that the manner of Emmanuel's death had not been appropriate for him. She, too, felt that it should have been something crushing and overwhelming.

The others laughed at her earnestness, asking what her own explanation was. She said, "Emmanuel never had anything that makes life endurable. He had nothing, I tell you! Nothing! He didn't even know that he'd been cheated of what was rightfully his, and that, to me, is the most dreadful thought of all."

"Perhaps you're right," said Phil Cottman, "but how do you account for the locked door, the non-existent weapon, the vanishing murderer?"

"My explanation is most simple," said Marcella. "I think God happened to be over Harlem on the night of the laundryman's death. I think He glanced down and saw Emmanuel working over his washtub, working fearfully, and with no discernible purpose. I think God looked back in time and saw what Emmanuel's life had been; then He looked forward, to see what the future held for him. When He saw that, he was so moved to compassion, seeing the future held nothing, that He bent down, took Emmanuel's skull between His thumb and forefinger, and crushed it."

A WINNER IN EQMM'S PRIZE CONTEST

The author of "The Street of the Buzzards" is in his early thirties and a writer by occupation. He sold his first story more than fifteen years ago and has "puttered at it ever since . . . in recent years with more deadly intent." During the war Mr. Wiegand was a staff member of Yank — as a correspondent overseas and as an editor in the New York office; and he was first National Executive Secretary of the American Veterans' Committee during the period of its greatest growth and activity.

Ever since, in his widespread travels, Mr. Wiegand spent a winter in Iceland, he has made sure that he spends every new winter in the tropics — on what he calls "the bargain basement beaches." He has lived in Haiti and in Mexico, and it was while he was living on the shores of Lake Chapala in Ajijic that he first heard the legend on which his prize-winning story is based.

THE STREET OF THE BUZZARDS

by DENNIS WIEGAND

PERICO CHAVEZ AMBLED ALONG THE cracked and uneven pavement of his district whistling the hit tune called "Gabrilan Pollero". It was a raffish melody, well suited to the spirit of Police Detective Chavez's district. Those obscure few blocks nestling deep in the bulk of Mexico City were affectionately known to its denizens by the name of "Barrio de los Zopilotes" — Neighborhood of the Buzzards.

Several of these ominous-looking auxiliaries to the Federal District's Department of Sanitation looked down upon Perico Chavez, pledged by law to protect them, from ancient, sun-baked roof-tops. The birds shifted nervously from one foot to the other as he passed.

This was an effect Perico Chavez had even upon the working people of his district. Perhaps it was municipal economy to take back Perico's elegant brown uniform with its gold badge and give him the title of Detective, thus allowing him to wear his own shabby, dust-impregnated gray suit while on duty, but the Neighborhood of the Buzzards was not deceived for a minute. Despite the leniency having ten children of his own imposed upon Perico Chavez, he was still a cop. They knew it, and Perico knew they knew it.

Of course, there were the few extra

pesos that went with the new dignity, making it possible to face up with slightly more confidence to the ceaseless demand for tortillas and frijoles. *Nombre de dios*, how those kids could eat!

But so it went with the fortunes of Perico Chavez. Even in the monthly National Lottery. Never a winning ticket.

Perico Chavez continued his stroll along the teeming streets, with their patched-together fruit and vegetable stalls. He felt a flicker of longing as he passed the stalls vending gewgaws and toiletries. There were so many beautiful things . . . *que bonitas!* . . . that one could buy for little girls, provided one had as many *pesos* as one had little girls.

Here and there, Perico took note of a furtive character darting off between the stalls to avoid his scrutiny. These creatures normally slept all day long. By night the Neighborhood of the Buzzards was alive with human scavengers — by night, when the feathered variety had tucked their naked heads beneath their wings.

Among people so poor, one could not justly use the word thief or bandit, so meager were the pickings and so many the pickers. Still, it was just as well for a man of much family, even though a detective, to be afoot in the Neighborhood of the Buzzards in the good clear light of day. A few minutes of lusty work with the blackjack here and there along the way, the dodging of a stone or two, and one was free to return to the bosom of one's family and the safety of the night at home. It was not for Perico Chavez to question the motives of those in authority when they made him a detective. They were wise and good. Many could even read and write.

Abruptly, his mood of sunlit philosophy was shattered. Something was wrong in the middle of the next block. Perico increased his pace to a brisk walk, withdrawing his revolver and blackjack from under the tails of his coat. He thrust back his neck to feel the reassuring pressure of the long knife strapped in its sheath between his shoulder blades.

The buzzards flexed their wings, staring beadily after him. They too had heard the shots, muffled for Perico by the thick adobe walls of the Cantina Esperanza. They awaited the result with deepening interest.

Perico was perspiring heavily by the time he forced his way through the chattering crowd to the slatted swinging doors of the Cantina Esperanza. The notice prohibiting entrance to minors and females, clearly visible when the doors came together, was being illegally ignored.

Devoting himself with energy to enforcing this wise regulation, Perico Chavez ignored for the moment the sprawled body which bled with quiet finality into the little gutter running along before the bar, the stream of water impeded by lime peelings and disintegrated cigarette stubs. Only when the women and children had retired with curses did Detective Chavez step authoritatively into the

circle which had formed around the body.

"It is Julio Ramirez, may the Eternal Light shine upon him," the bartender piously informed him, leaning across the high, narrow, tin-covered bar.

"I have eyes," Perico told him sharply. "Who has done this illegal and disrespectful thing?"

"Who knows?" responded the bartender. "One has not eyes in the back of one's head."

"Ah, Paco," said Perico, "but if I were to provide holes in the back of one's head, perhaps eyes would grow there to fill them."

"It is not kind to speak so to one who works hard for a living," the bartender protested. "Indeed, Perico, you know that this will be a very popular killing. No honest man would speak the killer's name."

"Yes, yes, Perico, little uncle," came a voice from the solemn circle. "You know we would tell you, in most cases, to preserve your prestige with the ones in authority. But this Julio Ramirez — may God preserve his soul — was a stinking rat."

Perico Chavez shrugged and ordered a uniformed policeman to telephone for an ambulance. The policeman went out in search of a telephone. The *pharmacia* two blocks down had an Ericson.

"I regret, Paco," said Perico to the bartender, "that it will not be possible to use this portion of the bar until Julio Ramirez is officially removed. The orders are most strict about such things. Perhaps you have enough sheets of some lie-spewing newspaper with which to cover him against the flies?"

Those whose *caballitos de tequila* and bottles of beer stood in the prohibited sector gingerly retrieved them, stepping over the denim-clad remains, and sought places along the already crowded end of the bar.

Perico Chavez graciously accepted a cold bottle of his favorite dark beer and, pushing his hat to the back of his head, settled down to wait.

It would serve no useful purpose to pry further into matters which didn't concern him. If there were no witnesses, what could one do? It would be futile to shake down the crowd for weapons. These had all been disposed of long ago. Indeed, he had seen many children, blouses bulging, hurry out of the Cantina to take Papa's pistol home where it would be safe.

At this moment Ricardo Salazar, Chief of Detectives in the Homicide Division, found himself faced with a delicate problem in international relations.

"We are honored," he purred to the tall, hawkish man who had just been ushered with pomp and circumstance into his office, "by a visit of inspection from the famous Inspector Kilgaren of the police of the great metropolis of New York."

Inspector Kilgaren looked about with interest.

"Thank you, Señor Salazar," he said. "Of course, there's nothing of-

ficial about this visit, but I'd appreciate the chance to observe your methods in investigating a homicide."

"Ah, you are enjoying a vacation in Mexico?" said Ricardo Salazar. "And the Floating Gardens of Xochimilco, you have seen them?"

"Yes, and the Palace of Chapultapec," groaned the New York policeman, "and just about everything else. My wife has herded me through it all. She's working on the murals of Diego Rivera this afternoon. But I'm just an old harness-bull, so I came over to see the way you fellows work."

Señor Salazar felt uncomfortable. This was a police official of international reputation.

"It is to be regretted," he said suavely, "that we have not at hand a suitable case for exhibit. An exceptional situation in our city, I grant you. At any rate, lacking the magnificent facilities of your great organization, I'm sure you would find uninspiring our crude, if effective, methods."

"I admit," smiled the Inspector, "that I'm a great believer in scientific crime detection. I don't see how you keep the lid on a city of three and a quarter million hot-blooded people without the very latest equipment and methods."

"Perhaps you forget, Inspector," said Salazar with a slight edge to his voice, "that the crimes of a hot-blooded people are not very complex. Fingerprints are of little avail in seeking a man who kills on the spur of the moment and without a previous police record. Fundamentally, we depend upon informers."

"To be honest with you," said the Inspector, "the stool pigeon is our best tool, too. However, I do wish I could see a Mexican detective in action."

"I am not a detective," shrugged Salazar, "I'm an administrator. And, it must be admitted, something of a politician."

It was at this point, while the Chief of Detectives writhed inwardly at the tactic of self-abnegation which this distinguished foreigner imposed upon him, that word of the murder in the Cantina Esperanza worked its way into General Headquarters. A police secretary casually informed the Chief of Detectives by telephone, a routine precaution in the event that obscure political policies were involved.

The secretary listened at startled attention while the telephone crackled instructions. Then, carrying out the Chief's orders with frantic haste, he checked again the name of the victim and the character of the neighborhood, seeking in vain for the key to the vast political importance of the slaying.

If the highly placed secretary was surprised and puzzled by the official interest in an unimportant killing, the feeling that came to Perico Chavez as the wail of many sirens began to converge upon the scene of his placid vigil can only be described as incredulous horror.

Perico Chavez lost all confidence in the eyes that had served him so well these many years as they watched the great, shiny sedans slide up to the curb one by one. In a moment the Cantina Esperanza was aswarm with police officers. It was far less crowded than before, however, for the Neighborhood of the Buzzards had quietly melted away in the face of this intense heat which some political lens had inexplicably concentrated on the late Julio Ramirez.

Perhaps it was true after all that Julio Ramirez was an illegitimate son of El Presidente, as he had so often boasted. How else this fuss?

Detective Perico Chavez dazedly found himself in the exalted presence of *El Jefe* himself, a personage whom many very old detectives had never seen. It was an honor a man with ten children to support could very well do without for his entire lifetime.

Fortunately, the Chief paid him no immediate attention, providing Perico Chavez with an opportunity to remember what his name was, in the unlikely event that the great man should ask it.

"You see?" Ricardo Salazar said in English to Inspector Kilgaren. "This is typical. A sordid slaying at a bar. No weapon to fingerprint. Bullets fired at very close range, penetrating the body and shattering themselves beyond identification against the walls. Motive probably one of impulse and quite useless in narrowing down the possible suspects."

The United States detective nodded politely, glancing about at the heavy battery of detective talent trained upon this case of no motive and no evidence.

"This man," continued Salazar, in the manner of a tourist guide, "is apparently the detective assigned to routine patrol of the immediate vicinity." He indicated Perico Chavez.

Since Perico Chavez had no English, the casual gesture set his heart pounding. The evident amazement with which the tall *gringo* examined the shabby little *mestizo*, dark with the rich Indian blood in his veins, made rubber of the knees of the father of ten children.

Perico Chavez fervently wished that he had been allowed to remain a simple policeman, happily directing his small quota of Mexico City's traffic.

"What does he have to say about it?" inquired the Inspector.

"No doubt he has already arrested the guilty man upon information received," explained Salazar.

Turning his attention full upon Perico Chavez, he switched to Spanish.

"Now, then," said the Chief, "who did this thing? You have no doubt sent him to your station house in custody?"

Smiling, Ricardo Salazar awaited the reply. He knew these offhand barroom cases very well. It was because he was confident that the killing would immediately be solved that he had decided to allow his distinguished visitor to watch the police

of the Federal District bring down a sitting duck.

Perico Chavez found himself speaking Spanish as if he were learning it by correspondence, and thinking in the native Indian dialect of his old mother, back in the little village among the mountains of the state of Jalisco.

Haltingly, he explained the miserable lack of information.

"What?" scowled the Chief of Detectives. "I refuse to believe this!"

Perico Chavez faltered excuses for the people of his district, ordinarily so free with information, who had denied him their confidence in this crucial hour.

"I will have none of this," said Salazar, and his voice was like a wire-barbed lash. "You will arrest every man known to have been in this *cantina* at the time of the slaying. You will take them to the station house and you will learn from them the name of the guilty man."

Turning to Inspector Kilgaren, Salazar looked apologetic.

"It would appear, my friend," he said ruefully, "that this is not so simple an affair as it would appear. However, witnesses are now being rounded up and an arrest will be announced shortly."

"Within twenty-four hours, we usually say," said Inspector Kilgaren with a smile.

"Exactly. Within twenty-four hours," said the Chief stiffly. "And now, if you will permit me to escort you to your hotel, Inspector, it will give me pleasure to offer you a drink in the lounge and to seek benefit of further conversation with you."

As the police officials filed out of the forlorn little Cantina Esperanza, each of them eyed Perico Chavez with baleful disgust. That he could have bungled this simple affair and embarrassed the Chief of Detectives! They felt no pity for him and his obvious fate.

Perico Chavez lingered disconsolately while the body of Julio Ramirez, petty crook and petty tyrant, was removed to the ambulance. Then he laid violent siege to Paco, the bartender, and to Lolita, Manuela, Consuela, Aminita, and all the other girls attached to the staff of the Cantina Esperanza. But not with any expectation of results.

As for arresting all the witnesses to the shooting of Julio Ramirez, not only would it produce no results, but Perico knew that subjecting so many people to a humiliating inconvenience would make even the daytime streets no place for the father of ten children. And, of course, such action would close off forever the well-spring of information.

So, although it seemed certain that his police career was about to come to an end, Perico Chavez did not comply with the mass-arrest order of the Chief of Detectives. After all, when he returned to pushing a wheelbarrow it would almost certainly be along these same streets. Better by far to make an enemy of El Jefe than of the people.

Besides, an idea had come to him out of that barely remembered mountain village in Jalisco. Mexicans are still Mexicans, Perico Chavez thought; and what is more to the point, most Mexicans are still Indians.

Leaving off his futile assault on the people of the *cantina*, Perico Chavez betook himself to the Morgue. A handful of the curious were in the barren room where Julio Ramirez lay in his municipal casket when Perico Chavez entered and beckoned the elderly Morgue attendant aside.

Perico whispered persuasively, cupping his badge in his hand for the old man to see.

"How not?" said the attendant, shrugging with indifference.

Drawing a short length of rope from his coat pocket, Perico Chavez walked up to the casket and very respectfully tied the dead man's feet together.

And then Perico went home to watch ten small Chavezes devour their evening meal.

But he returned that night to crouch on his haunches in the darkest corner of the room in which Julio Ramirez lay in his flimsy casket. In the dim ruby glow of a guttering vigil lamp, shadows leaped, attacking and retreating.

Death, which had seemed so trivial and unremarkable when it had come upon Julio Ramirez lying on the littered floor of the Cantina Esperanza, now invested his remains with a terrifying majesty. Detective Perico Chavez, hunkered down in the Indian's characteristic attitude of waiting, fought the fears which had him by the throat.

He told himself that he was a fool and that he should go home to his straw pallet on the floor immediately. He told himself that he had but to wait for a few days or weeks, taking note of all those who left the street of the Buzzards, and he would have the name of the murderer. For it was certain that the murderer would sooner or later flee, in the fear that he might be denounced by a jealous sweetheart or a bilked partner in crime.

Perico Chavez told himself that dependence upon an ancient superstition to do his police work was a waste of valuable sleeping time. And he told himself many other reasons for quitting this place of terrors.

But another voice told him to be patient and to struggle with his fears.

He was rewarded. With a suddenness and in an uncanny silence that shook Perico to his depths, the figure of a man appeared in the dim light of the vigil lamp and hovered over the open casket.

Perico Chavez bounced to the balls of his feet. With three swift strides he was upon the spectral figure. The blackjack whistled softly at it came down.

Even the half-Indian calm of Chuy Remos was shaken by the flurry of interest and excitement that centered about his prison cell.

After all, it was a simple matter. Julio Ramirez, one who had long been a pall upon the bright comradeship of the Cantina Esperanza, had hurled the wrong insult at the wrong man at the wrong time. So Chuy Remos had dredged up the huge, worn revolver from his shirt and emptied its contents into Julio Ramirez.

Well, so one was captured. Was that cause for such excessive zeal by the police? Was that reason for special orders to imprison unimportant Chuy Remos at Headquarters itself?

Chuy Remos looked sullenly upon the important-looking men who gazed in at him through the bars.

Not the least of these official visitors was Señor Ricardo Salazar, very pleased. He had spent a good part of the night miserably toying with the notion of staging a "crime" and its scientific solution, with an all-star cast of his own detectives, for the benefit of Inspector Kilgaren.

"There he is. You see?" Señor Salazar said happily in English. "And in something less than twenty-four hours."

Slightly bleared from being summoned from his bed shortly after dawn, Inspector Kilgaren examined the fierce-eyed little killer.

"He has confessed?"

"But of course, immediately. He knows that it would do him no good to lie."

"Somebody turn him in?"

"Ah, but no," said Salazar with a smile. "He was captured by this man, the detective regularly assigned to the district." He flipped a hand in the direction of Perico Chavez, scrubbed and brushed to shining threadbareness, standing numbly at attention nearby. "It is usual, in these simple matters, for our local men — with their special knowledge of the district and the people — to work alone. We find that a high calibre of officer on the local level results in prompt solutions."

"Really?" said Inspector Kilgaren. "How did he get on to his man?"

"By the psychological method," said the Chief of Detectives.

"Psychological method?" The Inspector glanced with respect at the swarthy little detective. "Please explain. I'm very interested."

"It was simply a matter of knowing the nature of the man behind the gun," Salazar said. "The gun is a civilized weapon, but the local detective knew that the man who fired it was a primitive type, as are so many of our people. Acting upon this theory, he merely made a conspicuous point of tying the dead man's legs together as he lay in state."

"Tied his legs together?" Inspector Kilgaren was astonished. "What earthly good could that do?"

"But naturally it forced the slayer to break into the Morgue that very night to untie them," Salazar said. "For, of course, here in the warm latitudes we bury our dead as soon as possible, especially when they have not been embalmed."

"Very wise precaution, I'm sure,"

said Kilgaren, still puzzled. "But why bother to untie a dead man's legs? He wasn't going anywhere, ha ha!"

"Ah, no, of course not," agreed Salazar. "But the slayer was. Remos knew that he would have to leave as soon as possible. The conspiracy of silence by the witnesses could not be depended upon to last for long."

"You mean the killer believed that because his victim's legs were tied," asked Inspector Kilgaren incredulously, "so were his own?"

"Indeed, yes," said Salazar with another smile. "It is a common superstition in our more primitive Indian villages. So it was merely a matter of knowing the mind of the man behind the gun, you see. Better than ballistics tests on the gun itself."

Kilgaren reached for Salazar's hand.

"This is the high point of my visit here," he told Salazar warmly. "What a story this will make back home. You've got a fine outfit here. Really wish it were possible to take this man back to New York with me. We have quite a Latin-American colony."

"I'm afraid we couldn't spare him," said El Jefe regretfully. "Without such men we are nothing. They are the backbone of our organization."

He reached out and patted Perico Chavez on the shoulder in a fatherly way.

"And what is your name, my boy?" he asked in Spanish.

A terrible thing then happened to Perico Chavez, who had been listening fearfully to a language he could not understand. The suddenness of the question in Spanish paralyzed his mind.

Perico Chavez was so startled that he forgot his name.

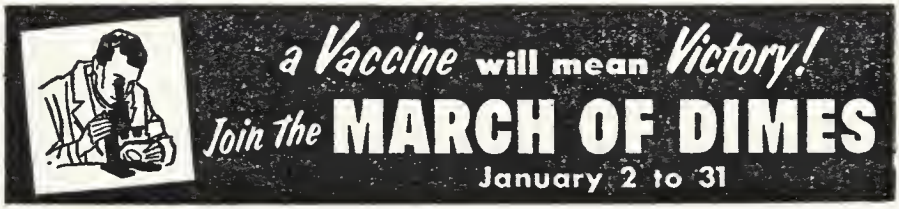
In his panic, all he could think of was the Chavez children, who would continue to eat the frijoles and the tortillas of a detective's pay.

So Perico Chavez blurted out the first words that had come to his mind.

"*Diez niños*," he said. "Ten children."

Smiling, Salazar turned to his secretary.

"See to it," he commanded, "that Police Detective Diez Niños is given a mark of commendation on his record of service."



A WINNER IN EQMM'S PRIZE CONTEST

A cold-blooded and cynical crime story by a rising young author who with his devoted wife are raising children, sheep, chickens, Christmas trees, and burdocks on their 27 rugged acres in Marcellus, New York . . . The locale of Mr. Sheehan's tale is fictitious, and any resemblance between the sports stadium in his story and any other arena is purely coincidental . . . Another original for our **BLACK MASK** *section.*

A G IS A G

by DAVID VINCENT SHEEHAN

GIORDINO WASN'T THE SORT OF man you would particularly notice at a basketball game. There are too many others like him — small, dark, fast-talking men in double-breasted suits who spend as much time gesticulating in the corridors as they do sitting impassively in the stands.

But Giordino was not familiar with the Boston Arena, and for a moment he could have looked conspicuous as he hesitated inside the turnstile to get his bearings. Then he walked slowly to the refreshment stand on the second level, ordered a beer, and brought it over to the opposite wall, out of the press of the crowd. He stood alongside a big blond man in a camel's-hair coat, but they ignored each other, keeping their eyes on the people milling about them.

"Who's the pigeon?" Giordino whispered, his lips barely moving.

The blond man turned casually, looking out into the passing crowd over the little man's head. "Some guy named Cushman — Number 13 on the Trojans." He held his cigarette hand carelessly in front of his mouth. "A nice number, ain't it? Why the hell does any guy wear 13?"

"Because," Giordino said, "the Trojans like 13. Ever since they have a Number 13 on the squad they get into the finals three years in a row. So for the Trojans 13 is a lucky number. Ain't it?"

"For creeps," the big blond man said. "Now this Cushman, he not only welshes on last night's point spread, but tonight he's also ready to sing, the boss thinks. So it's gotta be for keeps, know what I mean?"

"Fine." Giordino took a wry pull at his beer. "Nothing like a house full a witnesses. Like I'm Richard Widmark at the Paramount." He stared speculatively at a passing blonde. "What am I supposed to do, give him the evil eye?"

"You're supposed to be smart,

fancy boy," the big man said blandly. "All the way from New York, too." He dropped his cigarette and wiped it with his foot. "The top balcony is closed. Fire regulations. But you can get up there."

Giordino took another sip at his beer. "And the G — when do I get the G?"

"When I know Cushman is dead. You can get it," he added slowly, "when we see it in the papers."

"No dice. I get it on my way out — or right this minute I got important business in Brooklyn."

The big blond yanked at his collar and studied the beer ads on the opposite wall. "O.K. — on the way out."

For the first time Giordino's eyes swung coldly to his companion. "You better come along with me, Jack. This is a big place. Maybe I don't find you afterwards when I'm in a helluva hurry. Let's go up to that top deck."

The big blond lighted another cigarette. He was no longer the superior, now that he'd seen Giordino's eyes.

"Well — if that's the way you want it. The boss says this job's gotta get done tonight."

"Now you're being smart," Giordino said. "Come on." And he turned and walked up the corridor.

The top balcony was vacant — a rim of deserted shadows hanging above the brilliantly lighted well of the Arena. They stood at the rail next to a girder on the north end, looking down on the restless crowd that was filling the Arena.

Suddenly the public address system, until then droning out attendance statistics, sputtered weirdly and lapsed into silence. The mob roared its derision, and when the Trojans came out on the floor and the loudspeakers were still silent, they stamped their feet and chanted their disapproval.

Giordino sat down, his hands on the railing, and took a sight down towards the floor. It was a clear line, far over the heads of the crowd and the glass square of the backboard. It ended at a point just beyond the black keyhole painted on the floor.

He'd have to wait for a set shot from right about there — a set shot with no one covering. That would take some waiting. The Gaels wouldn't like Cushman to get set.

He turned his attention to the Trojan players as they shuttled back and forth in practice shots. He saw the tall slender figure in the yellow Trojan jersey, with a black 13 on the back, moving as effortlessly as a swallow in flight. He swore quietly and turned to his companion.

The blond man was leaning against a girder, stifling a yawn. Giordino watched him quietly, a little muscle rippling along the line of his jaw.

"So what do we do now?"

The blond shrugged. "This is your baby. You tell me." He yawned again. "Give me the ponies every time. Basketball I don't like. I wouldn't know the ball from the basket."

Giordino whistled tunelessly be-

tween his teeth, his basilisk eyes studying the heavy, bored face of the other.

"O.K.," he said. "You go up and stand in that exit — where you can see the whole balcony. If anybody comes up, toss a coin down near me." He smiled thinly. "I gotta keep my eye on Number 13."

When he saw the other man take his place in the shadow of the exit, Giordino turned his attention back to the floor. Little beads of perspiration glistened along his hat line. Down at the timekeeper's table the announcer was arguing frantically with the officials. But the PA system didn't go back on and the referee strode out on the floor with the ball jammed against his hip, whistling for the center jump.

Giordino pulled his gloves tight. From under his coat he withdrew a light target pistol, its slender snout encased in a silencer. Then he waited, the gun out of sight, his eyes intent on the kaleidoscope of the court below — yellow and blue jerseys, shifting and breaking in ever-changing patterns, surging alternately to the far end of the court and then streaming swiftly back. Occasionally the action would freeze momentarily for a jump ball or free throw, but the next instant the pattern would splinter into individual parts, blue against yellow, and go streaking up or down the polished floor . . .

Twice Giordino laid the barrel of his gun across his left forearm and brought his eyes down behind the sight, but each time the slender figure in the Number 13 jersey either broke out of position for a fast lay-up or was screened by a covering Gael.

A coin rattled sharply against the next seat and he glanced quickly around the balcony. An Arena employe, evidently an electrician, was over the middle of the court, trouble-shooting the snafued PA system. Giordino hunched himself in the shadow of the girder and the seconds ticked on. The clock on the electric scoreboard showed less than two minutes left in the last quarter.

Perspiration ran in tiny rivulets down Giordino's forehead. The electrician was making his way on the catwalk that led out over the court to where a cluster of horns was suspended like a chandelier.

Giordino sucked in his breath and pulled his head behind the leveling gun. Number 13 had just fed the ball inside and stepped back of the keyhole. The receiver faked towards the basket and rifled the ball back to Number 13 who took a deceptively leisurely step back, got set, and stood poised with the ball high over his head.

At that moment Giordino gently squeezed the trigger.

When he reached the balcony exit he stood close to the big blond man who was staring wide-eyed at the prostrate figure on the court below, with a dark blot already spreading across the white upturned face.

"A bull's-eye!" he marveled.

"Give me the G," Giordino snapped. He took it roughly, and at the same time slipped the gun into the side pocket of the big man's camel's-hair coat. Then he hurried down the dark stairwell.

When he got to the second level he paused at the mouth of a runway to light a cigarette and then elbow a craning usher.

"What's all the excitement?"

"Mulready — that new kid on the Trojans." The usher shielded the little man from a sudden surge of the crowd. "Killed for Pete's sake — shot smack between the eyes."

"Hey — whadya know!" Giordino looked incredulous. "Somebody *shot* him?"

"He was wearing Number 13 — Cushman's number. A cop tole me they picked Cushman up in the locker room just before the game. It's them gamblers — they musta thought this Mulready kid was Cushman, just because he was wearing 13." He spat disgustedly. "Hell, the poor kid don't even *look* like Cushman."

"Yeah, I know," Giordino said. He drew smoke deep into his thin chest. "I seen Cushman play in New York. Big hairy guy — I seen him play lotsa times."

But a G is a G . . .

(**Black Mask** *section continued on next page*)

"*Shiv, nurse.*"

Black Mask Magazine . . .

Hayden Howard's "Pass the Bottle" won a special award in EQMM's Eighth Annual Contest. As an editorial preface we had originally intended to give you some details about the author; but at the last moment we changed our mind. Mr. Howard has another prize-winning story in our Ninth contest — titled, provocatively, "The Dipping of the Candlemaker" — and we will tell you more about him when that story appears.

But what made us change our mind at the last moment? Well, it seemed to us that we should call your attention to a curious and interesting trend which manifested itself in our Eighth Annual Contest and which is clearly illustrated by Hayden Howard's "Pass the Bottle." The Eighth contest — running, we remind you, during most of 1952 — brought to light a surprisingly large number of tales of sociological significance; and the greatest percentage of these submissions dealt with crime and violence in slums, shantytowns, city dumps, and Skid Rows. The characters were the riffraff of our social system — bums, hopheads, and scavengers, depicted against backgrounds of trash, garbage, and tenements. In the case of Mr. Howard's story, the background is different — a city park; but the personnel is the same — outcasts and rummies . . . The Forlorn Fraternity of the Bottle.

What does it mean, this sudden emphasis on and preoccupation with the dregs of humanity? It is well known that "certain signs come before certain events." Were detective-story writers, during 1952, interpreting the shadows of impending economic conditions? Were they foreseeing or predicting a new era of depression — a depression with a capital D?

It is interesting to note further that this type of story fell off sharply — indeed, almost disappeared — in the submissions to last year's (1953's) contest. Make of it what you will . . .

PASS THE BOTTLE

by HAYDEN HOWARD

On a bench at the edge of the park where the buses load, a solitary man sat trying to decipher the Want Ads by street light. He did not raise his head when I paused to face him with my hand pressed deferentially to my shirtfront; he was playing deaf to the silence my

shoes made in the Saturday night din. And even when my wavering shadows blinded his paper he would not raise his head.

I dragged my shoe.

"No," he answered, in a voice that was flat and had worked a long, hard day.

But my nerves were screaming for another drink.

"Please, mister, I lost my pay check in a stud game and if you could see your way to give me a dime, even a bus token, sir. . . ." I tried not to breathe on him when I swayed. He was looking at me now, and I lowered my eyes to my hand and rushed through it, another inch of dying, another wince in the brain.

"If you could spare me a dime, sir, I could take the bus across the river and there is an old man who lets me sleep on his porch, because I can't go home this way, sir. Only a dime for the bus over the river, sir, and he will let me sleep on his porch. On his porch, sir, for only a dime." I knew bay rum had my talk chasing its own tail, but the way you earn your dime is to keep talking. "Sir, only a dime for the bus."

He was grinning at me, damn him, just a young punk who was wetting diapers when I went to work for Pinkerton's. And when I was dragging $100 a day, when I had my Atlanta office and two full-time operatives, this punk was shooting marbles. But now he was leaning back, fingering his lapel, inhaling to deliver the sermon: Snap out of it, my man; you look big and strong; get a job; get a shave; get religion; join the Army; stop feeling sorry for yourself; telephone Alcoholics Anonymous.

But he was a better punk than I figured.

"I'll just be shoving money down a rathole. You'll only walk it to Bay Street and buy yourself another, and I won't be helping you one mother-loving bit."

That was the truth.

Since the reform paper had lost interest in Herky's murder by the lily pool, about 40 feet from where this punk sat, the blueboys had quit clubbing us out of the hedges and there was no need to commute to the city limits. I might have promised him, and myself, I would not drink that dime, but you know how it is with us. Start thinking about it, got to have it, even sell your wife's bedclothes for it, and ten times ten days on the County Farm does not change a thing.

I heard my voice say: "Please, sir, only a dime for bus fare."

And after a couple of failures you can't face the A.A. boys anymore. You hide with the other Settlers in the park.

His hand squeezed into his pocket. He jingled, apparently feeling to make sure he did not bring up a quarter. I had him; after the agony, self-abasement, trembling anticipation, and sheathed hatred of it, I had him. Begging can be cousin to seduction. I had him, but Crackers

came blundering down the gravel parkway with his voice leaping and staggering ahead of him.

"Lawsy, Rip, help, Rip. Oh, Gawd, Rip." As his thin legs and arms pumped at me, I shoved him away so that he thudded to both knees, still clinging to my wrist and crying above the oncoming roar of the bus: "He's dying; Mr. Burke is dying and rolling and foaming at the mouth. When Ah come he was on his belly with his head in the pool and now he's rolling and dying and not moving anymore."

I cracked my hand across his wrists and whirled toward the bench. My dime. The man's newspaper slithered off the edge. He had hopped the bus. Its parting bellow joined my yell as I swung at Cracker's long, uplifted face. El Greco might have painted that face, but for the awkward mouth. I tried to stop my swing and fell to my knees, cracking heads with him. He was still gabbling about Mr. Burke when I could hear him again. And we dragged each other up, two sloths climbing on each other, and ran with balancing-pole arms the way good rummies do, up the gravel path, through a hedge, through a second hedge. . . .

Burke was curled up beside the pool with Lally standing over him. A wallet fluttered down upon its owner as Lally turned and giggled at us with his thick fingers spread apologetically and his face equally spread. No matter. Everything in its own time. I knelt. When I rang down Burke's eyelids with my thumbs I thought: You should have been a big shot, Burke, not a sometimes body-and-fender man; for the brass band in the Memorial Orchestra Shell was slamming out an appropriate finale and the honking, roaring and braying of the city was as if something important had happened.

I told them he was as dead as Herky, the same way probably; rat poison dissolved in bay rum, that was the autopsy before. And when the blueboys found his body there would be nightstick work in the park, then hot lights and the line-up, with special attention to Rip, yours truly, because once upon a time when he had a license and a blond mahogany office and friends on the City Council he told the D.A. where to shove it. He did not drink hair oil in those days; he rubbed it on his chest.

I looked up from Burke's body and said I was heading for the freight yards. Goodbye city, goodbye park, it's been lovely. But there are other Potter's Fields to lie in.

"Where's my drink, Lally?" I thought this little wake was worth a last pull on the pint-sized bulge that showed through his tucked-in sweater, and I plinked it with my fingernail, although sometimes that will start him fighting. A weird fat-boy, Lally. When he is high enough he is a take-a-drink boy with a personal variation: he jerks the bottle away. He wants you to fight him, hit him in the face; he likes that. Before his thyroid betrayed him he

was a circus acrobat, so it is a mistake to hit him unless you have a submachine gun and friendly witnesses.

His face spread some more and he fumbled at his belt. When I tried to help him he shoved me away, giggling. He held the bottle to the light, a quarter full. I reached for it; I was overdue. To my surprise his fingers opened and it dropped like a bright fish toward the pool, shattering loudly on the edge. I might have hit him in the face, but Crackers pointed wordlessly. I was standing on Burke's hand.

Behind me, around the curve of the pool, I heard them shuffling. I knew without looking, but I looked anyway: Pencil, who talked once a week, ornately, lost in his rich man's overcoat; Grandpa, that old whiner; and Kiddo, younger than Crackers, muscular; girls like him until he tries to say something and sprays; no towels with his showers, unfortunately. They had been watching us. They glanced at Burke as if they had been there before and were not worried where his money had gone. Although he must have had quite a bit of it, for he had worked all week and it was early yet, early Saturday night.

They were all looking at me. My fraternity.

"Let's move," I said; the squabble over Burke's money could come later.

But as if the night were not memorable enough, Pencil began to speak. It was his pleasant, prosperous voice, from another time, another place, where his gold pencil came from, his eyeglasses, his gold cigar cutter. I had not heard it since they had us under the lights when Herky died.

"Yes, sir, the police will be rather taken by this misadventure. They know who sleeps in the park. They will bring us back, Rip, all of us. And they won't fail twice. At random they will select one of us because we live here. I remember once when I was West Coast Representative for —."

Grandpa broke in on this digression. Grandpa was in a hurry, and Grandpa was scared. "What he means is we got to drag Burke down to Bay Street before they find him. I'm an old man, I can't stand being chased around, I'm an old man and I served my country in two wars. I got to have some place to sleep."

In the old soldiers' home they would not let him drink.

Kiddo's jaw began to jerk. "We ca-ca-ca-go no place. You tell the po-po-pleece and I ki-kill you because I got to have some place to sleep."

I do not think they had instructed him to say that. But it had a nice sound, and they nodded affirmatively, while Lally added more convincingly: "If you don't help us, we'll say you did it."

Then he stepped across and kicked Crackers. "Get up, we're going to move your Mr. Burke."

Crackers yipped and rubbed himself and looked at me. But I avoided his eyes because I could feel a smile

coming on. Not over him. When a weird idea begins to perk, my smile comes and I could double for Satan, my wife used to say. She would really love me now, minus my two front teeth.

"I think you're all stewed," I said. "You want to move the corpse, to play accessory and accomplice and visit a real jail where they won't taper you off for the County Farm. Great idea! We dump Burke on Bay Street and the cops ring in the bums down there and punch them until one confesses. We sleep safe and comfy in our park. Swell, until one of us gets high enough to talk, which should happen before the night is over, if Burke is going to stand treat for drinks the way I think he is. You couldn't hide a paper clip from a blind man."

But I added: "I'm willing to gamble if you are."

I let them relax for all of five seconds.

"However, I won't sleep so safe tonight. Two of us have died in this park, and if you read your bedclothes regularly you'd know there was quite an epidemic of rat poisoning among our northern fraternity brothers."

Pencil got it; he nodded vigorously. But the rest apparently were clouded by the assumption that God protects children and drunks, so I had to spell it out for them. Someone was murdering rummies and would presumably murder more rummies. It was very likely he lived in our park, was one of us, was listening to me right now. He had offered Hector a pull from his bottle, exit Hector, exit the prodeeds of Hector's service-disability check. And now when Burke got a week's wages, exit Burke.

"The moral," I said, "is don't take a pull from your best friend's bottle, in this park. But who is going to remember that when he gets high and friendly? And you can't very well go to the police about it, since we are going to slough Burke off on the Bay Street boys.

"Gentlemen," I couldn't help smiling, "what you need is a private detective. My fee will be fifty dollars."

When they had finished threatening me, inquiring what brand of gasoline I drank, and similar witticisms, I added that $25 would be the retainer, the other $25 payable at the completion of the case, when I had both apprehended and eliminated, at least as a future threat to them, our bottle-passer.

"Fifty dollars!" squawked Lally. "I haven't got fifty cents."

"Then these gentlemen have been holding out on you."

Possibly he was not lying; Burke's wallet had been emptied before he got there. And he had not considered that they, or one of them, rather than outsiders, had done him in. For he lunged at Grandpa, the smallest, with seemingly genuine rage.

The second time his open hand smacked Grandpa's head, the old man's upper plate jumped out like a boxer's mouthpiece and he collapsed, squealing unintelligibly, on

his back, with Lally's hands working over him like hungry squids. He found $2 in Grandpa's inside pocket, six pinned to his undershirt, ten in his shoe. Kiddo began to ease away from us. But I picked up the jagged neck of the bottle Lally had dropped and told him to unload; Burke had had more than eighteen dollars.

He sprayed the air with angry sputterings, but he had more muscle than courage and said he was willing to share and share alike. He fished out a handful of bills.

"Tha-that dirty old Grandpa shouldn't have any, though. He-he was holding out on us all the time."

Thirteen dollars was all he claimed to have, five less than Grandpa, who had gotten there first. While Grandpa and he made noises at each other, Pencil calmly laid his $13 on the grass. He explained, without apology, that Kiddo and he had come upon Grandpa kneeling over the still-twitching man and demanded a three-way split. Grandpa, who had been feeling over Burke, finding a little money here, a little there, obliged. They took his word as a soldier in two wars and as a gentleman that he was not holding back, Pencil said. And they retired to the fern garden from where, a few moments later, they watched Lally and Crackers discover the body, which gave a final twitch for Crackers's benefit.

Lally sent him to get me, and worked over the body in his absence, with no results as far as they could see, except a religious medal, which Pencil now said he should put back. He appealed to Lally's practicality rather than to sentiment.

"You realize, Lally, that a distinctive keepsake like that might incriminate you. The police might think you poisoned Mr. Burke." So Lally brusquely returned it to its rightful owner. They were all looking over their shoulders now.

After some threats and counter-threats all of the money, presumably, was laid in the middle of our friendly circle. I let Pencil arrange the money in six piles of $7 each, with $2 left over.

Suddenly Crackers jumped up and shouted: "Ah don't want none of Mistuh Burke's money!"

I tripped him before he could run very far, and brought him back, using the broken bottle as a persuader.

"That is right," Pencil said calmly; for once he seemed as sober as a sober judge. "For the protection of the others, each must have a share of the money." And he deftly thrust $7 into Crackers's shirt pocket and explained with many impressive words that he was now incriminated and would surely be electrocuted if anyone found out about this. If he talked, that is.

"You can always drop your money in the poorbox if it worries you," I said, bending over a scrap of paper near Burke's knee. It had a paperclip on it. It was the slip that had been clipped to his paycheck showing withholding tax computations, and it

showed that his check was for $84.

Although it was quite possible that in the hours since he came off work he had spent the missing $40 — paying off bar debts, most likely — I let out a roar of rage and demanded to know who was holding out $40. While the original three were taken aback and shouting at each other, I handed Lally his $7 and winked to make sure he knew something to his benefit was next on my program. And I scooped up the rest of the money, saying: "Here is twenty-three dollars toward my retainer fee. Since you are my friends, I will forget the other two dollars and call it square."

I waited with the broken bottle glinting in my hand and Lally standing beside me until the forceless tumult died, then I said I would do my best to detect the guilty man and save their necks, certainly a bargain at $25, or $5 a neck. I added that when I discovered the missing $40 I would not claim a share of it, other than the $25 they would owe me at the completion of the case. I have had more satisfied clients! These three could not intimidate me; however, since I knew they were not armed and they were also my chief suspects.

I took their minds off money by accusing Grandpa of murder.

Grandpa's upper plate had been split by Lally's blow. From his frightened clicks and whistles I deduced he was claiming someone had been there before him. Attracted by Burke's groans, he had brushed noisily through the hedges in time to catch a last glimpse of someone vanishing into the shadows of the fern garden, apparently frightened from the body by his approach.

"I'm an old man; I wouldn't tell a lie. Mr. Burke's wallet was on the ground and his pants pockets was turned out when I got there. I'm an old man and all I wanted was a place to sleep. The only money I could find was pinned inside his pants cuff."

The lights along the path were dim this far back, but I found a dandy set of footprints leading off through the fern garden. Then I found another set, and a third and a fourth; there were more sets than that. However, by announcing that non-cooperation would be taken as a sign of guilt, I badgered them into stamping their footprints on the edge of the garden. They were complaining but cowed.

I found a set of my own prints from a preceding day. The only man whose retreating prints I did not find was Lally. Grandpa picked this moment of negative discovery to recognize Lally as the one who had fled through the fern bed. Since Lally seemed about to do violence, Grandpa switched his recognition to Pencil, who was as short as Lally but about half as wide and therefore safer to accuse. I kept my deductions, such as they were, to myself, and went off on another verbal tack.

"When the police searched the park after Hector's death, they found

the wrapper from one of the pellets of rat poison. It resembled the wax paper around a caramel, was brown, and was printed: KNOCK 'EM DEAD GUARANTEED RAT POISON. A similar wrapper was found up north somewhere. The newspapers said they are packed twelve to a box and that if the police had found the box they would have been able to trace it to the store that sold it because of the rubber-stamped numbers on it. The box is yellow cardboard, about a third the size of a cigar box."

"D-d-do you mean you want us to l-l-look for it?"

"But if you turn it over as evidence," Grandpa wailed, "they'll run us all through the line-up again. I'm an old man and someone will recognize me for sure."

I knew what he meant. After Hector's death they had stood us up before about twenty hardware store and feed-and-fuel employees, a small sample in a city this size, and three of them had recognized Grandpa because he was twice as woebegone, hunched, and shifty-eyed as the rest of us. Only one had put the finger on me. Lally also earned a recognition, while Crackers, Pencil, and Kiddo passed as the cleancut type.

"Cheer up, Grandpa, you're my client. Everything will be handled through unofficial channels." I wondered what I was talking about.

As for the box, I guessed the murderer would carry it with him from park to park and not risk buying a new one each time, merely to use one pellet. Also, why waste money when you can spend it on liquor? Now four or five men had died up north and two here. A box half-empty becomes inconvenient to carry. This would be about the time for the murderer to throw it away.

I watched my listless brethren search a trash barrel. It was possible, if they got warm, the man might make some unconscious movement that would give him away. But I would probably select the wrong one. I had never been quite up to the par of radio Dick Tracys, even in my one-bottle days.

Grandpa found a quart-sized soft-drink bottle worth a five-cent deposit. The crowd going home from the band concert flowed incuriously around us. After we had worked the trashcans, which we did every night anyway, my searchers rebelled. We proceeded en masse to the men's washroom, although I insisted it would not be unlocked yet.

The park policy is to have an attendant in there at all times. During the concerts, Waldo locks it and goes to the one at the rear of the orchestra shell, where he stands guard until the audience has left.

The light was on. He was back.

Now Waldo despises us, but he is afraid to do anything about it because he has to walk through the darkened park every night when he goes home. But tonight anger gave him courage. He stood there in a small tile-bottomed lake, gripping a wet mop like a club.

"Get away, you trash. One of you bums tried to flush a cardboard box. And look what you done!" He splashed the water with his mop, and I did not jump back quickly enough.

But I asked quickly enough: "Which one of us?"

"I don't know which one." There was only futile anger in his face, no ideas. "Now get away. I step out for a hot dog before concert time and some dumb drunk tries to flush a box and I have to go to the concert with my feet wet. Now get away!"

With a mixture of relief and excitement I herded them out. We made it snappy in the bushes because we were all worrying whether someone had stumbled on Burke, whom we had rearranged comfortably in the ferns. Only Lally seemed to have understood all the implications of the flood. At least he said: "I think I'll wait around here and take a smoke."

"Uh, uh," I retorted. "The man who tries to sneak off is automatically guilty in my book." And I was strongly supported by the others — a case of mutual distrust. We would stay together at least until Burke was safely established on Bay Street.

When we reached the corpse, Pencil hastily inquired: "Shall we begin?" He was already tugging at Burke's arm, rolling his eyes as self-consciously as a dog apprehended in a butcher shop. The others glanced at me.

"Wait up," I laughed. "Give the street lights a chance to dim. Wait until the Saturday night blueboys go indoors for coffee or whatever cops are drinking these days. We can't risk having them arrest Burke as a drunk when we take him across the street."

Then I assumed my most reassuring professional smile. "Now I will leave you clients to stand watch over each other while I proceed with the investigation."

"Where you going?" demanded Lally. "How do we know you're coming back?"

"To the first question: No comment. To the second: I have never double-crossed a client when his money was in my pocket."

Nevertheless, they insisted that Lally accompany me. Lally winked broadly at me, but I wiped his smile away by suggesting that Pencil come, too. I did not want Lally to get me alone where he could ask for his split of the $23 I had gouged from them.

The three of us waited in the shadows behind the washroom until Waldo carried out his trash can, locked up, and left, whistling to keep up his courage and detouring wherever black shadows overlay the path.

We burrowed into that can like alley cats. From the sodden heap, after we dumped it, Pencil snatched a strip of cardboard, but it was white. Then I found a waxy lump and palmed it; I knew without looking what it was, and felt less quixotic as I burrowed deeper. My windmill of theories had a concrete foundation.

Lally found the box. I would have seen it myself, but I was looking for

something yellower. The box, or the remnant of it, had faded until it appeared nearly white. I reached for it, but he drew back with an unpleasant smile.

"Finders keepers." He blinked at the stamped numbers and thrust it in his pocket.

I considered jumping him, but I had been so many hours without a drink that my blood was a little thin. I thought I'd wait until he was off guard or tried to run away. As we walked back through the park, with Lally in the middle and trying to lag behind, Pencil said: "Did you notice? In the moment Lally was good enough to show it to us, one end was gone and the edge of the top had a piece torn out of it, as though someone had begun to tear it up and was frightened by something and hastily tried to flush the entire box."

"Yeah. Since there are no doors on the stalls, he would have been jumpy. Maybe a cop walked in."

"What are you going to do now?" Pencil went on.

"The first thing, now that the street lights have dimmed, is to move Burke's body to Bay Street, since its location when discovered is the thing most directly connected with my clients' welfare."

Pencil was lost in his overcoat, solemn, dignified.

"How can you have one of us arrested for murder without dragging the rest of us, your clients, into the case?" he inquired. "Protection from the police is the main thing we are paying for, which you admitted in reference to the disposal of Burke. I refuse to undergo the indignity of the lights just to confirm that one of us is a murderer. I have important friends and I could not bear to have them read of me as a witness in this sordid affair." His voice ended in a tremor.

Lally giggled.

"I was a private detective for eighteen years," I said, not laughing. "Keeping things quiet is our specialty. That's why people hire us instead of going to the police. You will be surprised how discreetly this affair will end."

We rejoined the rest of my clients, and after we had walked Burke to Bay Street and into an empty fish-cleaning shed that was illuminated in a silvery way by a dock light, I asked Pencil where he had met Kiddo that night.

Kiddo gave an outraged gasp and edged toward the light as though he suspected I had selected him as fall-guy. But he did not go any further. He wanted to hear what Pencil said.

"I met him shortly before we discovered Grandpa looting the body. I met him on the diagonal path where the benches are — on the other side of the fern bed."

Kiddo nodded sourly; he had found a bigger worry.

"Wh-wh-where's Crackers? He-he's been gone too long. I bet you sent him for the po-police."

"Take it easy," I soothed. "I wouldn't do a thing like that. I won't get the innocent men mixed up in the

police drag-in, not even as witnesses."

"I'm an old man," Grandpa whined. "Stop looking at me that way."

"I was looking over your shoulder at friend Lally. How about showing us the evidence, Lally?"

He giggled and held the cardboard up, then stuffed it back in his pocket. His possession of it was insurance in case I tried to frame him; that was what he was thinking. He would be a tough man to take anything away from. It was the only concrete evidence.

"Now Lally did not leave any tracks in the fern garden," I began. But at that moment Crackers hissed at me from the outer corner of the shed and I went out to him and led him around out of sight.

He handed over the two flat pint bottles of blended Scotch. They seemed identical. One I slipped into the lining of my coat, around near the back where I can carry such treasures inconspicuously; the other I opened. After refreshing myself, I had to chuckle. I took the other one out again and drank it down to the same level before I put it back.

Their faces lighted up when they saw the bottle, small as it was. They had been hanging on a long time tonight without even a bellywarmer.

They craned while I unwrapped the pellet and pushed it in and stirred it with a splinter until it was dissolved. This was good rat poison. It did not even cloud the bottle.

"I suppose a long swig of this would kill a man," I said, and slid it into my coat, out of sight."

"Now any amateur psychologist could point out the one of you who would be most likely to make a hobby of poisoning bums. Of course any of you, except Crackers perhaps, might be tempted, especially when high or dry, to thump a buddy for his money."

Grandpa chittered something unintelligible.

"Now Grandpa, impetuous fellows like Lally and Kiddo would tend to use a lead pipe, a rock, or a push-button knife—whatever was at hand. You are too little and old to risk such violent exercise. To your credit, however, you are such a nervous, worried old man that I doubt if you could methodically and regularly poison your park-fellows without giving yourself away."

Grandpa blubbered.

"But enough cat and mouse. Unusual crimes take unusual men. To murder six men could be most easily done if the murderer did not in any way identify himself with those men, if he had a subconcious hatred of them, if he felt as though he were doing the world a favor. Then it would be as easy as killing rats.

"From my experience and reading when I was a detective — held a license, that is — I learned it is very simple to murder a man. Takes a little thought, that's all. But most murderers are as human as the next guy and they get all balled up and make things hard for themselves."

I grinned at them. My wife would

have said: You look like Satan; turn it off. I suppose it runs deeper than looks; I like to see guys squirm. With the exception of Pencil they all looked guilty, even Crackers.

I rubbed my lips with the heel of my hand and came to the point.

"I have had my eye on you from the first. You were admirably cool, so much so that you didn't mind gambling. But the breaks had to catch up with you some time. And I would not recommend you for a job with Murder, Incorporated. For when someone came into the washroom while you were tearing up the box, you tried to rush things — or flush things, if I may make a pun."

Pencil smiled politely.

"And you let your nerves get away from you when you snatched so quickly at that piece of white cardboard. You were looking for white. We were looking for yellow. Lally did a double-take and read the box before he had a nervous reaction. From that moment I had no doubts."

"No wonder you were a failure as a detective." Pencil was still smiling.

"Uh, uh. It was bottles and a too hospitable wife and more bottles to drown the urge to shoot her where she needed it, plus taking out my sorrows on the D.A., Pencil. Not low I.Q. And you can stop smiling. You are probably right. After all this time, the salesclerks won't be able to make a positive identification."

I felt around in my coat, brought out a bottle.

"In this court we don't need that sort of evidence. We play Socrates and the hemlock."

I looked at Lally. Lally locked a full nelson on the motionless man.

"We even help him drink it."

I unscrewed the cap and crawled toward Pencil, watching the muscles in his clenched jaw pulse like frantic hearts. He let out a yell that was straight from his bowels. Lally exerted pressure and his voice trickled out in a diminishing series of bleats.

"Ease up on him, Lally, you'll break it off. Now Pencil, I can see you are in no mood to commit suicide. You might even enjoy the publicity of a trial. After all, they were only bums you were eliminating. You were doing the country a favor. You could plead insanity, and you might win. After a few years' room and board, they might even let you out. All you have to do to keep from drinking this stuff, and having to thrash around crying and screaming for fifteen minutes before you die, is write out a confession."

I had Crackers hunt around for some rope. Padding his legs with a sack, I tied them loosely but securely. When we found a large piece of wrapping paper I told Lally to let up on Pencil.

"Take out your gold pencil, Pencil, and start with your first murder. Give us some details. You are an educated man, and you have plenty of space to write in."

As far as I could tell, he did not phony it up. I had him sign it.

"Of course," he addressed them

after he had regained his composure, "I will tell your names to the police and you will be dragged in and given the third degree."

That started Grandpa complaining. But I assured them I had powerful friends in the department. They were my clients and I would keep them out of the law the way I promised.

"Let's have the carton, Lally." He handed it over without a murmur. I advised them to disappear for a week or so, and in a flash of shadows Pencil and I were alone.

He smiled at me. "The thirty-four dollars are pinned under the tail of my coat." He must have already imbibed the other six.

"Finish your novel first," I replied. "Then we will do our accounting."

When he had signed each of seven parts, he smiled hopefully. I unpinned the $34 and smiled back. "You didn't expect me to let you go for thirty-four dollars?"

Then he remembered and momentarily lost his composure.

"I should have thought to tell them. You crook, you sent them away so that you could claim the entire reward."

I extracted a bottle from my coat. "Care for your drink now?"

Involuntarily his jaw muscles whitened. He did not care to take his medicine. I leered at him and uptilted the bottle.

He did not notice that I barely lowered the level of the bottle. I shivered and put it back inside my coat.

When we had shivered an hour longer, I had another drink.

"Oh, hell," I said. "You can have a bellywarmer if you want it. With all this reward coming to me, thanks to you, I can buy plenty more." But I made no move to hand it to him.

"Two hundred fifths of Scotch," he murmured, dolefully watching the bottle disappear into my coat.

"That's about it," I replied cheerily. "You know, it doesn't take much to put me high. I said I was going to give you a drink and immediately forgot about it."

I extracted a bottle, unscrewed it and handed it to him. He grabbed it. His nose was gray with cold and his hands trembled as he raised the bottle.

I let him drink until he was out of breath.

He smiled and blinked and felt better.

But you should have seen the expression on his face when I extracted the second bottle from my coat and toasted him. Bottoms up!

Twenty minutes later I untied his leg ropes.

Suicide.

I always give my clients their money's worth. Full protection.

Eleven days for $1057 to vanish; who can remember where? Gone. I should have drunk from his bottle.

But if you could spare a dime, sir, even a bus token, I could pass over the river, and there is an old man who lets me sleep on his porch. He won't let me in the house anymore, but he lets me sleep on his porch.

SHERLOCK HOLMES FIRST EDITIONS:

A New and Revised Catalogue of the Queen Collection

by ELLERY QUEEN

ONE BRIGHT, WARM DAY in the midsummer of 1948 — so different from the bleak and windy days of Baker Street in the 1890s — our morning mail brought us a pale-yellow copy of Volume 3, Number 3, of "The Baker Street Journal." Now, one did not receive the highly irregular issues of "The Baker Street Journal" and put them casually aside. Despite the mountain of deadline matters which constantly hides the tops of our two desks, we stole enough time to riffle through the pages of "The BSJ" and came upon that always piquant department called "Bibliographical Notes." There we saw an article titled *A Sherlockian Catalog*, which proved, on examination, to be a listing of the Tales of Sherlock Holmes, comprising the library collection of Edgar W. Smith of Summit, New Jersey, the beloved Buttons-cum-Commissionaire of The Baker Street Irregulars.

Now, it is a matter of inescapable record that we have always found bibliographic bibble-babble irresistible, whether of Sherlock in particular or sleuths in general. Besides, we thought Edgar Smith's idea most attractive: to exchange information on Sherlock Holmes collections — and thus know who has what and where some of the great 'tec treasures dwell — is surely a most conanical form of the pursuit of happiness.

So, as a belated companion piece to Mr. Smith's, we decided to put together a Sherlockian Catalogue of the Ellery Queen collection. Since space limitations prevent our giving you either a complete listing or full bibliographic data, we shall restrict ourselves almost exclusively to first-edition highspots — to an irreducible minimum of the essential books that make up a definitive library of Holmesian cornerstones. No attempt will be made, therefore, to include even the important reprints, reissues, and variants; or any of the alternate first editions, omnibuses, anthologies, and foreign-language editions; or any of the seemingly multitudinous volumes and periodicals which contain parodies, burlesques, and pastiches. Indeed, our list of keystones covers a mere *seventeen* different books, but we hope that you will find the notes and comments on these particular copies both interesting and mouth-watering.

A Study in Scarlet.
In Beeton's Christmas Annual for [1887]. London: Ward, Lock, 8vo, colored pictorial wrappers. Two copies: one as fresh as the day it came off the press, the other as described below.

First appearance in print of the first Sherlock Holmes story.

The most important "association" copy of this book known today. Originally owned by Vincent Starrett, it is the copy with the right-hand top corner of the front cover missing, as illustrated on the full-page insert facing page 15 of Vincent Starrett's The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes (1933) and on the full-page insert facing page 304 of Howard Haycraft's Murder for Pleasure (1941).

The copy contains the following handwritten notation on the page facing the inside front cover: *First issue, First Edition, of this impossibly rare book. V.S.* The title-page is inscribed by Vincent Starrett.

A Study in Scarlet.
London: Ward, Lock, 1888, 16mo, colored wrappers. First issue, with the word "younger" spelled correctly in paragraph 2, line 3, of the Publishers' Preface.

First regular-book edition of the first Sherlock Holmes story. An immense rarity: the only known copy in a private collection in complete original state, with both the front and back wrappers intact.

In Volume 1, Number 1, of "The Baker Street Journal," David A. Randall stated that A Study in Scarlet "in its first book appearance" is "by far the most difficult of all the Sherlock Holmes books to secure in original condition . . . It is infinitely rarer than its original appearance in Beeton's Christmas Annual."

Together with a holograph letter signed A. Conan Doyle, in which Doyle wrote: *I omitted to say in my note that I owe much, as you say, to Poe . . .*

The Sign of the Four; or, the Problem of the Sholtos.
In "Lippincott's Monthly Magazine" for February 1890. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 8vo, colored wrappers.

First appearance in print of the second Sherlock Holmes story.

An excellent copy, with the spine intact, originally in the Carroll Atwood Wilson collection.

THE SIGN OF FOUR.
London: Spencer Blackett, 1890, 12mo, red decorated cloth. Imprint on base of spine reads: SPENCER BLACKETT'S Standard Library.

First book edition of the second Sherlock Holmes story.

The Frank J. Hogan copy — one of the finest known.

A Scandal of [sic] Bohemia.
Original manuscript of the first Sherlock Holmes short story, consisting of 30 holograph pages mounted on blank leaves and bound, folio, in full turquoise-blue morocco.

The second most important detective short story manuscript extant — second only to Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue.*

The manuscript of *A Scandal of Bohemia* was received at the offices of "The Strand Magazine" on April 6, 1891. Page 30 of the manuscript is signed: *A Conan Doyle. 2 Upper Wimpole Street London W.*

A Scandal in Bohemia.
A Case of Identity.
In THE SIGN OF THE FOUR. New York: United States Book Company (Lovell, Coryell on spine), [1891], 12mo, light-blue decorated cloth.

The first book-appearance of these two short stories, according to Carroll Atwood Wilson's bibliographical notes.

The Red-Headed League.
The Boscombe Valley Mystery.
In THE DOINGS OF RAFFLES HAW. New York: Lovell, Coryell, July 1892, 12mo, colored wrappers. Number 5 of "The Belmore Series." First issue, first state, bearing the publisher's address: 43, 45 and 47 East Tenth Street.

The first book-appearance of these two short stories, as revealed by David A. Randall in Volume 2, Number 4, of "The Baker Street Journal," pages 491–496.

Together with a holograph letter signed A. Conan Doyle, in which Doyle wrote: *I observed that Lovell Coryell & Co. had stolen two of the Holmes stories. I presume that those two must have come out before the Act passed. I don't think they will make any serious difference to our collection of 24 Sherlock Holmes Adventures, but it is annoying none the less.*

THE ADVENTURES OF SHERLOCK HOLMES.
London: George Newnes, 1892, first edition, roy. 8vo, light blue-green pictorial cloth. Three copies: two extremely fine, the third as described below.

A virtually mint copy and one of only two known first editions of THE ADVENTURES inscribed by Doyle. The inscription, on the title-page, reads: *Mrs. Astrop With New Years Greetings from* [A. Conan Doyle].

MEMOIRS OF SHERLOCK HOLMES.
New York: Harper, dated 1894 but issued late in 1893, first edition, 12mo, light gray-blue pictorial cloth. Two copies: one mint, the other as described below.

Contains the first book-appearance of *The Card-Board Box.*

A fine copy with the name of the original owner, Will M. Bloss, and Vincent Starrett's bookplate on the inside of the front cover; the verso of the flyleaf is inscribed by Vincent Starrett.

This is a unique copy because of the handwritten notations on the inside of the back cover. The first reads: *First American edn, first issue, containing* The Cardboard [*sic*] Box, *almost immediately suppressed. It was not published in the English edition at all, and not again in either country until 1917, when it turned up in* THE CASE BOOK. *V.S.*

The second notation reads: *Imagine catching V.S. in a Sherlockian error! Of course, he means* HIS LAST BOW! *E.Q.*

Together with two holograph letters, both signed A. Conan Doyle, in which Doyle gave two different explanations for his insistence on omitting *The Card-Board Box.* The earlier letter reads, in part: *The story omitted is rather more sensational than I care for.* The later letter reads, in part: *As far as the book goes I should certainly wish . . . the second story (which is weak) to be omitted.*

THE MEMOIRS OF SHERLOCK HOLMES.
London: George Newnes, 1894, first English edition, roy. 8vo, dark-blue pictorial cloth. Three copies: two extremely fine, the third as described below.

Probably the finest copy extant — it would be impossible to imagine a finer one.

Further, it is the only known copy in the original dust-jacket.

The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes: "The Field Bazaar."
In "The Student" (Edinburgh University Magazine) for November 20, 1896. Edinburgh: The Students' Representative Council, 8vo, gold decorated wrappers.

First appearance in print of this "fragment." The title-page is inscribed by Vincent Starrett.

First separate edition: London: The Athenæum Press, [1934], leaflet, 2 pages, 8vo, white paper, limited to 100 copies, privately printed by A. G. Macdonell and given to the membership of the Sherlock Holmes Society, now disbanded, as a souvenir of their annual dinner, in 1934.

First separate book-appearance in America as THE FIELD BAZAAR: Summit, New Jersey: The Pamphlet House, 1947, thin 8vo, simulated green buckram, white paper label on front cover, limited to 250 copies.

THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES: ANOTHER ADVENTURE OF SHERLOCK HOLMES.
London: George Newnes, 1902, first edition, 12mo, red pictorial cloth.

An immaculate copy, brilliantly fresh, and the only known copy in the original dust-jacket.

THE RETURN OF SHERLOCK HOLMES.
London: George Newnes, 1905, first edition, 12mo, slate-blue cloth.

An unusually good copy of a book which most collectors agree is far scarcer than THE ADVENTURES.

This copy contains the bookplate of Ned Guymon, the great pioneer collector of detective fiction.

SHERLOCK HOLMES: THE ADVENTURE OF THE DYING DETECTIVE.
New York: P. F. Collier, 1913, first edition, thin 18mo, vellum spine, gray boards, paper label on spine. Two copies: one fine, the other as described below.

First appearance in book form, issued by the Advertising Department of "Collier's Weekly" as a Christmas presentation.

The second copy contains the bookplate of Vincent Starrett and is inscribed by him on the second flyleaf.

Together with "the authenticated Titular Investiture of *The Dying Detective*," signed by Christopher Morley, Gasogene-cum-Tantalus, and Edgar W. Smith, Buttons-cum-Commissionaire, and affixed thereto "the Canonical recompense of the IRREGULAR SHILLING" — representing the Conanical proof of Ellery Queen's membership in the Sherlockian society, The Baker Street Irregulars.

THE VALLEY OF FEAR.
London: Smith, Elder, 1915, first edition, 12mo, red cloth.

A mint copy from the library of Michael Sadleir, the eminent authority on and collector of Nineteenth Century fiction.

Together with three holograph letters, two signed ACD, the third signed A. Conan Doyle, all dealing with the plot and writing of THE VALLEY OF FEAR. Here are some quotations from the letters:

I fancy this is my swan-song in Fiction.

As in THE [*sic*] STUDY IN SCARLET *the plot goes to America for at least half the book while it recounts the events which led up to the crime in England which has engaged Holmes' services. You will remember that in S in S it was a Mormon drama. In this case it is the Molly McQuire* [*sic*] *Outrages in the Coalfields of Pennsylvania tho' I change all names so as not to get into possible Irish politics. This part of the story will contain one surprise which I hope will be a real staggerer to the most confirmed reader. But of course in this long stretch we abandon Holmes. That is necessary.*

As to the "swan-song" or goose cackle what I mean is that if I had a good competence I would devote myself to serious literary or historical work.

His Last Bow: some reminiscences of sherlock holmes.
London: John Murray, 1917, first edition, 12mo, red cloth.

A mint copy in dust-jacket from the library of Michael Sadleir.

How Watson Learned the Trick.
In the book of the queen's dolls' house. Pages 92–94 of Volume II: the queen's dolls' house library (edited by E. V. Lucas). London: Methuen, 1924, first edition, 4to, linen spine, blue boards, white paper label on spine, original dust-jackets, 2 volumes, limited to 1500 copies. First edition in America issued by Camden House, Chicago, 1947, thin 18mo, white boards, privately printed for Robert J. Bayer and Vincent Starrett, limited to 60 copies.

Mint editions. the book of the queen's dolls' house is a "presentation copy," so inscribed on the verso of the title-page of both volumes — but to whom from whom is not known.

The Camden House edition is a presentation copy from Vincent Starrett, with the inscription written on the verso of the front cover.

The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes.
London: John Murray, 1927, first edition, 12mo, red cloth.

A mint copy in dust-jacket with the "Brackenburn" bookplate of Hugh Walpole.

It would be contrary to human nature for most of you to read about these precious books — some of them unique, in the strict sense of the word — without wondering just what "precious" means in negotiable coin of the realm. What are these seventeen first editions worth? How much would it cost a collector to duplicate some and approximate others?

First editions have a definite market price, based on supply and demand. The deviation from the existing market values depends on two added factors: first, condition, and second, special features of provenance, inscription, or association. The rule on condition is simple: the finer the state of preservation, the higher the value. The difference can be considerable: a mint copy in the original dust-jacket can easily be worth ten times the value of an ordinary or average copy. The importance of condition cannot be overemphasized: Michael Sadleir has written that "condition more than anything else nowadays dictates value and will continue to dictate it."

The rule on the second factor is not quite so simple: first editions which

have interesting or significant pedigrees, which contain inscriptions by the authors, or which have literary, historical, or bibliographical "associations," are obviously much more desirable to the collector than the garden-variety of first editions. The extent of that differential is always a compromise between how avidly the collector wants a particular copy and how well-lined is his pocketbook.

First editions of the seventeen keystones listed above can be bought at current prices for about $750 to $1000 — for run-of-the-market copies, sound but not shabby, and without inscriptions, "associations," or special provenance. Even at this cost the collector must be armed with patience and endowed with persistence — since some of these first editions are exceedingly hard to find in *any* condition. Not one of the seventeen first editions in the Queen collection, however, is ordinary: the seventeen are highly selected copies which have taken half a lifetime to seek out, with the help of dealers, bookscouts, and fellow enthusiasts all over the world. In this connection, we would be remiss not to acknowledge in print our colossal debt to House of El Dieff (Lew D. Feldman), 184-11 Tudor Road, Jamaica 3, New York — the foremost dealer in the world specializing in detective first editions and detective story manuscripts. Without the help of House of El Dieff these seventeen choice copies could never have been gathered under one ratiocinative roof.

For the purpose of insurance protection we would appraise the seventeen first editions comprising this Sherlockian Catalogue, together with the holograph manuscript of *A Scandal of Bohemia*, at, in round figures, $5000. But if some Capitalist of Criminology, some Midas of Murder, came along and offered us double that amount, we would not experience a split-second's hesitation. We would rather have the books. We have had too much fun finding them, reading them, treasuring them, and showing them off to rival collectors. They are part of the fabric of our life; they are part of our dreams. And while we mean this in a completely idealistic sense, it may come to pass that unwittingly we have combined business with pleasure. For there will always be those who crave or covet first editions of the Tales of Sherlock, and as the years go by, the supply will diminish and the demand will increase. And one of these years our present appraisal may seem so low as to appear ludicrous.

Do you doubt the very possibility? Then let us remind you that THE PROSE ROMANCES OF EDGAR A. POE, containing the first book-appearance of *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, was published in 1843 at 12½ cents, that a very fine copy sold in recent years for a price reputed to have been $25,000, and

that the Library of Congress is said to have insured its inscribed copy (although lacking the back wrapper) for no less than $50,000!

On the other hand, it would be wise always to remember Milton Waldman's sobering words: "A Shakespeare first folio, bought in 1623 for perhaps $10, might bring $30,000 today if in first-class condition. But that same $10, if invested at 5 per cent and interest compounded, would now be worth over $300,000,000."

On the other hand, too, it would be equally wise to remember this intoxicating thought: Can $300,000,000 *per se*, lying stagnant in some underground bank vault and dutifully collecting its compound interest — can the mere possession of even that amount of money give as much sheer delight, as much inspiration, solace, beauty, guidance, understanding, and sheer pleasure as the possession of rare and wondrous books? To quote and paraphrase our betters, books are the tree of life and the fourfold river of Paradise . . . books are the image of God . . . books are a finer world within the world . . . books are our best friends, our counsellors and our comforters . . . books are the Meccas of the mind . . .

Yes, wealth dies, books never . . . far more seemly, dear reader, to have thy study full of books than thy purse full of money . . .

WINNER OF A SPECIAL AWARD

CONVERSATION AT AN INN

by PHYLLIS BENTLEY

"YOU READ DETECTIVE STORIES much?" asked the traveler, pushing his glass across the bar.

"Can't say I do," said the landlord.

"Same again, please. Well, in the heart of the hills like this," said the traveler, "I daresay you don't get much of anything to read, eh?"

He looked out at the view, which was one of high, bare, interlocking hills, with a stream rushing turbulently towards him down a narrow valley. The inn, standing at the junction of two roads, two mountain passes, seemed to catch every wind that blew; the traveler's car at the door shook in the blast, and a line of washing in the little grassy enclosure at the side of the inn flapped wildly, bulging and cracking. Heavy gray clouds driving up over the most westerly mountain threatened rain before long. The traveler shivered, and commended the impulse which had led him to stop at the lonely little inn for a drink to warm him on his way.

"Not much to read here, eh?" he repeated.

"No," said the landlord.

"Newspapers, of course," said the traveler, glancing towards one which lay thrown down carelessly on the long wooden settle. "How do they come, eh? Is there a railway nearby?"

"Nearest railhead is eight miles off, at Hawby."

"They come from there by road, then?"

"Aye," said the landlord shortly. He hesitated, then added in a surly tone, "I bring 'em when I go into Hawby."

"And how many trains come into little Hawby?"

"One at noon and one at 4 each day."

"A young fellow like you must find it pretty dull, out here in the wilds."

"Oh, I don't know. I keep busy. I've my vegetables to grow, and my cow and my hens to tend."

"But aren't you ever lonely?"

"No," said the landlord shortly.

"You're married perhaps?"

"Yes."

"And your wife — doesn't she find it dull? No cinemas, no shops, no colored lights?"

"I take her into Hawby now and again. You want to know a lot, don't you?" said the landlord impatiently.

"It's my trade," said the traveler with a self-satisfied smirk.

"Your trade? What are you, then?"

"Guess."

"Are you — in the police?"

"Do policemen wear clothes like mine?"

"I reckon not," said the landlord with a short sigh, eyeing the well-cut tweeds, the gleaming brown shoes, the diamond-studded cufflinks, the expensive tie.

"Guess again."

"Some sort of journalist?"

"You're getting warmer. So warm, in fact, that I'll stand you a drink as a reward."

"What are you really?" said the landlord, pulling the handle to draw himself a glass of beer.

"I'm a writer."

"That's what I said."

"No, I mean a fiction writer. I write detective stories."

"Is there much to be made that way?" asked the landlord.

"Quite a lot," said the traveler with another smirk.

"And is it difficult, then?"

"Not to me. I just go about with my eyes open, and any odd little thing that strikes me — anything out of the ordinary, you know — I simply make a note of it. Then later when I come across another odd little thing, I put them together and invent an explanation that covers both."

"Sounds easy, the way you put it."

"Well, of course you have to have the gift. The ability to construct plots — that is, chains of cause and effect — by linking apparently unconnected facts, is one of the fiction-writer's essential qualifications."

"Indeed," said the landlord, somehow conveying in this solitary word his conviction that the traveler was talking some sort of conceited nonsense.

"Just to show you," said the traveler, stung by the landlord's tone. "I'll give you an example. As I came along by the stream here —"

"The Brune beck, we call it."

"As I drove along by the Brune beck, over that narrow humped-back bridge, I saw a shoe."

"How do you mean, a shoe?"

"A man's shoe. Tan leather, modern style with a tongue and strap, new, well cleaned. It was lying by the beck under the bridge, half in and half out of the water. Now that, you see, was something a trifle odd, a little out of the ordinary. Why throw away a perfectly good shoe? Why throw away a *single* shoe? I noted it down in my memory and passed on."

"You didn't get out and look at the shoe, then?"

"No. I saw all those details without leaving the car. I don't miss much, landlord!"

"I see you don't," said the landlord drily.

"However, a moment or two later I did get out of the car."

"Aye. I thought I saw you," said the landlord.

"A piece of colored paper, oval in shape, was blowing along the grass at the side of the road. It stuck against a thistle; the wind released it and drove it along, then it caught again, and so on. I couldn't resist stopping the car to see what it was."

"Seems a lot of bother over a bit of colored paper," said the landlord contemptuously.

"Ah, you're not a story-teller, my friend. I had some difficulty in catching the paper — several times the wind drove it ahead just as I seemed to have it in my grasp. That made me all the more eager, of course."

"To me it seems silly work," said the landlord.

"I caught it at last. It was an old tattered steamship label, quite a fancy one, with a picture of a fair-sized steamer with red funnels, the name of the steamship company in white lettering on a blue ground, and a green border. You know how these stick-on labels are apt to come unstuck from a suitcase — this one had blown for miles, I expect. Here it is," said the traveler, and he drew out his wallet from an inner pocket and extracted the label from its folds. "*Frank Jackway, passenger from Newcastle to Oslo*," he read aloud.

He offered the label to the landlord, who turned it slowly about in his clumsy fingers.

"Of course I shan't use that name," said the traveler, "Though it's a good noncommittal name, I must say."

"How do you mean?"

"It's not suggestive — doesn't give anything away. Might belong to a young man, might belong to one in middle life. Might be rich, might be poor. That's useful, you see; helps to keep up the suspense. Editors like suspense."

"You're going to write a story about it, then?" said the landlord.

"Well, yes. That is," said the traveler, pacing rather fretfully about the little bar-parlor, "if I can find some other detail to clinch the thing. I usually need three, you know, to make a story."

"Three. Yes," said the landlord. "I've often noticed that myself. You need three to make a thing safe."

"Safe?"

"Held up at both ends, like," explained the landlord. "Complete."

"That's right!" exclaimed the traveler. "You're a most helpful and understanding listener, landlord, if I may say so. Pray draw yourself another glass of beer."

"And one for you?" said the landlord, pulling the handle.

"Well, I don't know if I have time," said the traveler as the grandfather clock in the corner struck noon. "I have to be in Newcastle by 1 o'clock."

"You'll scarcely make it," said the landlord.

The traveler glanced at the expensive watch whose heavy mesh band encircled his wrist. "Your clock's a little fast."

"Only a few minutes," said the landlord.

"Just enough for another glass," said the traveler cheerfully.

The landlord silently drew the beer and proffered it to him.

"Now about this story," resumed the traveler in a musing tone. "I think I should handle it this way. A traveler finding the shoe and the label would deduce a murder."

"A *murder?*" said the landlord, startled.

"Yes. Of Frank Jackway, of course," continued the traveler impatiently. "Nothing else would explain the label and the single shoe. I must say," he went on thoughtfully, "that shoe takes some explaining. Now let me see. Frank must have been murdered at the bridge. He was advancing towards the bridge from the direction of this inn, when he met his murderer, who for some reason attacked him at once. Or, of course, his murderer might have been chasing him from the inn. That's perhaps more probable. To avoid the attack, Frank left the road and ran down to the beck. The murderer followed him, striking at him furiously. Frank slipped as he was struck and his foot caught between a couple of mossy stones. Thus held, he was an easy victim for the raging innkeeper."

"The *innkeeper?*" exclaimed the landlord. "How does he come into it?"

"He's the murderer, of course."

"But why?" inquired the landlord. "It's not the usual thing."

"Never mind the motive for the moment. Let me finish with the actual crime. In his struggles to free himself Frank managed to pull his foot partly from his shoe. But it was too late; the murderer — who must have been a man of considerable strength, fairly young and hearty — rained blows on the unfortunate man until he died. When the innkeeper realized his victim was dead, he set about concealing the body. First, he heaved poor Frank up onto his shoulder. The tug of his powerful arms wrenched Frank's foot from the shoe, and the murderer in his frenzy did not notice its absence. That's how the shoe was left behind in the beck, where I observed it."

"Where was the body hidden?" asked the landlord.

"Oh, I don't know," said the traveler, airily waving his hands. "I haven't worked that out yet. Not in the beck, I think; it's hardly deep enough for such a purpose. Perhaps in some bog higher up the hillside — I saw a patch of marshy, reedy ground on that ledge of the hill as I passed by." He strolled to the window to point out the hill. "Ah, the rain's come! Pretty heavy, too. Or perhaps there's a moorland pool handy, eh?"

"There is a tarn," admitted the landlord. "But —"

"Frank's suitcase, from which the label had become detached, could be found in the tarn as well."

"It's rather a shallow tarn," murmured the landlord. "I hardly think the water'd cover a body."

"Come, come," said the traveler impatiently. "This is my story after all — I can make my fictitious tarn any depth I like, you know."

"Aye, so you can. Very convenient," said the landlord, a shade of irony in his tone.

"But I'm not sure," said the traveler consideringly; "I'm not really *sure* I shall use the suitcase label at all. It's a little obvious, don't you

think? A trifle crude? Corny, as the Americans used to say. Besides, it establishes poor Frank's identity rather too soon. I'd rather," said the traveler, pointing, "use the date on that newspaper lying on the settle there. Make the date today's. The clock has just struck noon and the papers don't reach Hawby till noon, so some traveler from the outer world must have brought that paper to this inn. That establishes the presence here of a traveler preceding me. See how it's done? Quite neat, isn't it?" said the traveler, beginning to stroll towards the settle.

"But there's a weak link in your chain," said the landlord.

Partly vexed by the criticism, partly pleased to have overcome the landlord's previous scornful indifference — for his tone now showed, the traveler thought, a lively, even an urgent interest — the traveler said sharply, "Where?" and showed that he took the question seriously by turning back towards the bar.

"Why did the innkeeper murder that Frank?" objected the landlord. "What was wrong between 'em, like?"

"You're right. I haven't fixed that yet. For that, I shall need another clue. I told you I always needed three."

"Three," repeated the landlord thoughtfully.

"Yes. Now what can I find here, I wonder?" said the traveler, strolling round the bar-room. "My God, what rain! Sounds as if it would beat in the windows. A framed large-scale map of the district — that's no good. Couple of stuffed trout in glass cases, two pounds or so apiece, taken in the Brune by so-and-so. No, I don't see anything there. If it was a comic kind of detective story, of course," said the traveler, laughing, "a pair of stuffed fish would be just the thing. But I don't see this story as comic. No; quite the contrary. I think it's very tragic and sinister. A *crime passionnel*, I'm inclined to believe."

"What's that?" enquired the landlord.

"A crime of passion. Some anger between a man and a woman. Jealousy, perhaps. Yes, jealousy would fit. Frank had been playing around with the innkeeper's wife, I should say. Yes, and that day the innkeeper caught them at it. Coming in unexpectedly, you know. A certain amount of sympathy might be felt with the murderer, possibly. I think I shall let him escape arrest —"

"You will?" exclaimed the landlord.

"— but get sucked into the bog, or fall over a cliff or something, while the police are close at his heels in the final chase."

"Ah," said the landlord sardonically. "A cliff. That'd finish him off."

"Or a bog."

"But I don't see you got any evidence about that Frank and the man's wife," objected the landlord. "How d'you make that out, eh? Where's your clue for that?"

"I don't know," said the traveler. He continued to pace about the bar-

room, glancing shrewdly at everything he passed. "Have you any suggestions, landlord? It's a very vital point."

The landlord shook his head.

"Why!" exclaimed the traveler, stopping by the window suddenly. "It's worse than I thought! This is a double murder, landlord! The woman has been killed as well!"

"The woman?" said the landlord slowly.

"Yes. The innkeeper's wife."

"How do you make that out?"

"Look!"

The traveler pointed dramatically through the window. The landlord slowly turned his head.

"I don't see anything — suspicious," he said at length.

"My good man!" exclaimed the traveler. "What woman would leave the washing still hanging on the line, in such a storm of rain as this?"

"Happen she didn't notice it was raining," suggested the landlord.

"Not see or hear this rain? Only if her eyes and ears were out of function," said the traveler. "Only, that is, if she were dead. Well, that does it," he went on in a different tone. He picked up his hat from the settle and swung it jauntily. "There's my story, quite complete. Only needs to be written down. How much do I owe you, landlord? No, keep the change."

"Thank you, sir, I'm much obliged, I'm sure."

"Not at all. Only too grateful for your help. I'll send you a copy of the story when it appears."

"I shall like to have that," said the landlord, coming out from behind the bar to open the door for the traveler. As he raised the old-fashioned latch the grandfather clock struck the half-hour. "I'm afraid you'll be late for your appointment in Newcastle, sir," he said.

"How far is it?"

"Upwards of thirty miles."

The traveler clicked his tongue in vexation. "Well, I shall be late. She won't be pleased." He winked at the landlord, who did not smile. "But I've got a good story by it, anyway," he said. "Now, what's the quickest route?"

"You go back the way you came, sir, over the bridge, and then bear left — there's a valley opens out that way. That's the main road — but come to think of it," said the landlord, smiling, "there's a short cut you might take through the woods a mile or two further on."

"Does it cut off much?" asked the traveler eagerly.

"All of seven mile. It's the first opening on the left, you can't miss it. Joins the main road again further on. It's only a rough track at the beginning," he explained apologetically, "but it gets better as you go. It's a bit steep too, at first. But a car like yours will take it easy. My own old heap of scrap-iron can manage it if I get a bit of a run first. Radiator boils a bit, that's all. But yours'll take it like a bird."

The traveler went on his way rejoicing. Indeed, he sang with glee as

he swung the wheel and his powerful machine glided smoothly round the curves of the valley road. He had found one honey of a story. What atmosphere! That lonely, sombre little inn in the heart of those wild towering moors. The rocky tumbling stream. The howling wind, the heavy driving rain. The innkeeper — dark, handsome, sinister, with powerful physique and bare muscular arms. Come to think, it would do no harm to take the actual landlord as a model; a pretty hefty fellow, the landlord, and not bad-looking in a beefy sort of way. Then Frank Jackway — must change the name of course; would he be a commercial traveler? Or a Hawby doctor, perhaps? Better be somebody from Hawby, he supposed. Pity. Not very glamorous. But difficult to see how the wife knew him well enough, otherwise. The girl, now; the wife. Young and fair, of course; but should she be handsome or merely pretty? A shrew or a nitwit? A flirt or a good but unhappy girl? All that needed a lot of thought and work, reflected the traveler; but never mind, he was equal to it; give him a story and he could make it live all right; characterization, he thought complacently, had always been one of his strongest points.

The lane was certainly rough and steep, but it was evidently in general use, for recent tire tracks showed clearly in the mud and decayed leaves which covered part of its stony surface. The traveler, approaching what appeared to be a sharp turn, remembered the landlord's comments on the lane's gradients and pressed the accelerator.

No turn, however, existed. The lane just came to an end above a disused quarry. The quarry, the traveler knew in a flash, into which the landlord had recently tipped the bodies of his wife and her lover Frank Jackway. As the landlord had agreed, one always needed three to make a thing safe; in this case it was three murders.

As his car began its plunge down the face of the quarry cliff to the mass of rocks and brambles far below, the traveler had time for a very poignant regret. It was a professional regret — a regret for failure in his métier. How much he had missed! The date on the newspaper; the map (which would mark the quarry) on the wall; the inaction of the landlord about the rain-soaked wash; even the stuffed trout, which showed that guests stayed sometimes at the little inn for fishing — Frank Jackway, no doubt, was such a guest, for he sometimes went to Norway, where the fishing is good. Yes, how much, how terribly much, the traveler had missed! As for his vaunted characterization — his power to perceive and portray human nature — since his utter failure with the landlord, the less said about his characterization the better. As a matter of fact, there was no time now in which to say anything, for the car hit the bottom of the quarry and burst into flame. His poor craftsmanship had cost the traveler his life.

DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES

Donald McNutt Douglass' "The Ghost of Greenwich Village" is one of the thirteen "first stories" which won special awards in EQMM's Eighth Annual Contest. As a "first story," it shows fine promise. The easy colloquial style and breezy atmosphere are refreshing, and unusual for a tec tyro. Mr. Douglass has a definite feeling for people, and a knack for making them believable. It is interesting to note that more than twenty years ago the author lived in the very apartment he describes and that a visitor did arrive in just the manner related in the story. The real-life mystery, however, was never solved . . .

Mr. Douglass is in his early fifties. He has always been and still is an architect. His firm is called Donald Douglass Houses, Inc., located in Wilton, Connecticut, and it deals in prefabricated homes. But it looks now as if Mr. Douglass has embarked — at least, on a part-time basis — on a new career. We wish him great success in building (pardon the pun!) prefabricated tomes . . .

THE GHOST OF GREENWICH VILLAGE

by DONALD McNUTT DOUGLASS

I WAS INVOLVED IN A MURDER CASE one time. I was even one of the suspects. It was before I was married. I was living with MacPherson Smith and we had this two-room basement apartment on Eleventh Street. It was dirty and down-at-the-heel but it had a garden in back. Rather, it had space for a garden. There was a brick terrace and the rest of the area was covered with something that looked like soil. We tried grass, annuals, perennials, and a rose bush and it was sudden death for all of them. But we did have enough garden furniture on the terrace to make it seem pretty elegant for a couple of bachelors. It also had its own private entrance, which was an added attraction in our eyes.

The apartment on the first floor, just over us, was occupied by a man and his wife and a kid about eight or nine years old. The name was Foster. The man had one leg shorter than the other and he walked with a bad limp. Being a traveling salesman, he was away a good deal. The wife was not bad-looking at all, a bleached blonde

with a definite invitation in her eye, and both Mac and I entertained ideas from time to time. But we never did anything about it on account of that kid. He was, without a doubt, the most objectionable child I ever knew. I won't try to describe him. Just think of any bad trait — he had it. He was constantly pestering us for a nickel and, if we didn't give it to him, he would set up a howl and run to his mother, saying, "The man hit me the man slapped me, the man knocked me down." What a character! We never laid a hand on him, but it wasn't because we didn't want to.

He got plenty of punishment from his parents, though, especially from his father, and of course when he did get a spanking it sounded as though he were being skinned alive. One night his cries were so anguished we thought he was being boiled in oil. Windows went up all over the block and people who lived on Tenth Street and didn't know the little brat threatened to call the police. The father cussed the neighbors back and it had all the makings of a community wing-ding. The only ones who thoroughly enjoyed the evening were Mac and me.

The second-floor apartment was occupied by an old couple named Hogan who owned the house, and on the third floor were two old-maid artists. That, plus the various cops and detectives, is the cast of characters.

I've got to explain the layout of our apartment because the setting is important to the story. Our living room was in the back, on the garden side, and the bathroom was on that side, too, opening off the living room. To enter the house, you went through an iron gate on the sidewalk. This gate clanged. Then you went down a few steps under the stoop and through a door that didn't fit very well and had to be jerked and slammed to open or close. Then along a corridor past the bedroom and kitchenette to the door of the living room. The living-room door had a Yale lock. The bedroom door to the corridor was nailed shut. The outside door was never locked.

I have good enough reason to remember the date. It was June 21, 1927, about 11:30 P.M. It had been a hot day, all the windows were open, and Mac and I were getting ready for bed. We had had three or four beers during the evening and were stone-cold sober.

I had my shirt and shoes off when we heard the iron gate open and clang shut. Then three steps down and the front door being manhandled and slammed. Either Mac or I said, "Who the hell is barging in at this hour?" and we heard this guy's footsteps along the corridor. You could hear them as though they were in the same room. He stopped at our door and we sat there in that state of suspended animation in which you wait for a knock or a hail.

But no sound came. No rattling at the knob, nothing.

I went into the living room and

listened. There was a half-inch crack under that door and you could have heard a person breathing. Only, I didn't hear a person breathing. I called out, "Who's there?" and got no answer. I guess I needed a little moral support because I called Mac and asked him if he had heard what I heard. He said, "Sure, it's Foster." The minute Mac said that, I knew he was right. Those footsteps were the limping steps of Foster, the guy that lived upstairs. We had heard them over our heads a thousand times. But why didn't he knock or something?

Well, Mac and I opened the door and nobody was there. I tell you it makes the chills run up my spine just writing about it.

Mac and I, both being of sound mind and not given to hallucinations, had heard Foster open and close the iron gate, open and shut the front door — neither operation physically possible without loud noises — and we had heard his unmistakable steps along the uncarpeted corridor. There was no place he could have gone, but he was not there. Nobody was there. It wasn't a big corridor, you understand, maybe twenty or twenty-two feet long and four feet wide.

I went to the outside door and pulled it, shudderingly, open. It was the only way it ever would open. We had heard it all. Foster had come in and disappeared.

I'll repeat. It was utterly, completely impossible.

But there were two things that proved the two of us weren't suffering from dual hypnosis or delirium tremens. For one thing, the light was on. A little bare fifteen-watt bulb, with a chain hanging from it, was sending out its feeble rays. That was one thing we just never forgot. It was an automatic reaction. We would always pull the chain to light the light, unlock our door, and pull the chain again. I never knew Mac to leave that light on, and he said the same about me. Second, spaced all along the corridor, about eighteen inches apart, there were spots, about as large as a quarter, of wet, sticky, new blood. We had stepped in some of them and they made a bright red smear.

We went back in our living room and locked the door. I remember I kept looking at Mac for some sort of reassurance, but I didn't get any. He looked just as green as I felt. It wasn't the blood. Both of us had been through a war. It was the fact that Foster wasn't there and yet he still must be. There just was no place for him to have gone.

We were young and we had a half-bottle of bathtub gin, but the experience had been so eerie we almost wanted to hold each other's hands. We discussed calling the police, but it was out of the question. They would say we were crocked. After all, that was the only explanation we could give ourselves.

The gin was a big help and the bars on our bedroom window a great satisfaction, but we did look under our beds before we got into them.

The next morning I opened the

living-room door while Mac was brushing his teeth. The blood spots were no longer wet but were still there.

Mac and I sort of mutually shut up. But when I got to the office I told the boys all the lurid details. I was glad, then, we hadn't called the police the night before. The only response I got was skepticism and wisecracks. O.K., we were crocked. Forget it!

That night nothing happened, but I was mighty glad when Mac called up to suggest we meet for dinner and go home together.

The blood spots were still on the floor.

The next night was uneventful too, but the night after that, the twenty-fourth, was a lulu. It was a Friday, pay day, and Mac and I had done ourselves very well at Luigi's with plenty of chianti. When we came out of the restaurant, a beautiful thunderstorm was in progress and by the time we got home we were wet to the skin. We had just got inside, and we were matching coins as to who would get the first hot shower, when we heard the iron gate creak. We froze in our tracks, being sensitive, and listened. The outside door was opened and banged. Tottering footsteps came along the corridor and there was a knocking at our door. "Who is it?" I called, and only got more knocking. I doubt if we would ever have opened that door without having had the chianti, but we did, and there was our landlord, old Mr. Hogan, looking like a ghost and trembling so that he, literally, couldn't speak.

Right away, we felt better. There is nothing that gives you more courage than to be scared to death and suddenly find someone else more frightened than you are. After all, Mr. Hogan was not only finite and human, we knew him. We paid him rent.

It seems that the spinster ladies on the top floor had smelled a dead rat and had called Mr. Hogan the day before. Today Mrs. Hogan, with a less sensitive nose, had smelled the dead rat too. And tonight Mr. Hogan, with the least sensitive nose of all, had finally smelled the dead rat and let himself into the Fosters' apartment to investigate. He had not found the dead rat but he had found Mr. Foster. Mr. Foster had his hat on and his throat cut. Mr. Hogan was extremely incoherent but he seemed to be especially shocked that Mr. Foster had had his throat cut *with* his hat on.

Otherwise, the apartment was empty.

It is curious about the human mind. Mac told me afterward that he felt exactly as I had. He was delighted that Mr. Foster had had his throat cut, hat or no hat. Not that we bore Mr. Foster any ill will. Quite the contrary — he spanked efficiently and in the right place. But he had proved himself to be human, even though dead. How he had got out of our corridor and into his own apartment was still a deep mystery, but at least he certainly wasn't the wraith that we had imagined him to be.

We thought this at the time and were immensely relieved.

Later, we weren't so sure.

We were still comforting old Mr. Hogan when the police trooped in. Because we had called them, they came into our place first. After they had heard Hogan's story, we all went outdoors and up the front stoop together. He did have an odor. It's funny we hadn't noticed it. I guess a thing like that goes up, not down.

All of a sudden this detective or inspector, the head man on the job, turned to me and said, "You know anything about this, bud?" and I started to tell him, Mac joining in. He looked at us with a very fishy eye and took off his hat. It's a fact that detectives *do* keep their hats on as a rule.

"Clancy," he said to a uniformed policeman, "take these two birds below where we found 'em, and sit on 'em." So Clancy and Mac and I went back to our apartment and sat down. We tried to tell Clancy what had happened but he wouldn't listen.

"Save your breath," Clancy said. "I'm just sitting on you."

From what we could hear, the whole police department was upstairs. There were sirens and squad cars and ambulances, and everybody in the neighborhood seemed to be on the street outside.

Finally the activity upstairs quieted down and this inspector, another plain-clothes man, another cop, and Mr. Hogan walked in. They didn't pay any attention to us or to Mr. Hogan. They went over the whole place with flashlights, inside and out. In the garden they found that, because our floor level was two or three feet below the level of the garden, a person could go out there, pull himself up quite easily, and get onto the Foster's porch.

The three of them came back in the living room and sat down, hats still on. The inspector looked at Mac and me and then he turned to me and he said, "Where's the babe?"

"What babe?" I said.

"That babe," he said, not taking his eyes off me but tossing over an eight-by-ten photograph. It was Mrs. Foster, without any clothes on. I examined it carefully and handed it to Mac, who examined it likewise.

"Listen, you young punks." The inspector was talking to both of us now. "Hogan tells me this Wilbur Foster was away most of the time, and the two old dames upstairs swear they've seen his wife shining up to both of you. With the layout you got here, I don't have to hunt for the the guy who stuck him, or wonder why. I just want the details and where I can find *Mrs.* Foster."

Mac rose to the occasion. He was all dignity.

"Lieutenant," he said, "we are law-abiding citizens who happen to live in the apartment beneath the Fosters, just as Mr. Hogan lives in the apartment *over* them. We have never made any improper advances to Mrs. Foster. We don't even know

her first name. I don't deny that, as the kind maiden ladies have told you, she has seemed at times less than unapproachable, and I don't deny that we've discussed approaching her, but we never did. Mrs. Foster has a son who is better protection than a pack of wolves. She and her brat have been gone for about a week and everybody in the vicinity is happy about it. If we never see them again, it will be too soon."

Mr. Hogan nodded vigorously.

"We have no idea where she is," Mac continued, "but we do have a story about Mr. Foster. We'll tell it to you, if you'd like to hear it."

The inspector grunted, so Mac told him our story, ending up with a dramatic exhibition of the blood stains.

Somehow the very implausibility of our tale seemed to take suspicion from us. They tried opening and closing the front door and made the usual noise with it. The plain-clothes man examined the little panel at the end of the corridor which was designed to give access to the plumbing in our bathroom, but that was seen to be nailed to its casing frame, and numerous coats of old paint seemed to indicate it had not been opened since being installed. The whole story stumped them, as it had us, but they didn't seem to think it was a lie. After all, what could be the point?

By this time it was after 3, the body had been removed, and everybody was bushed, including the inspector. He told us to stay put for further questioning in the morning, they scraped up some of the blood, and they departed. I don't think Mac and I exchanged a word. Our sopping clothing had dried on us without our giving it a thought. I know I was asleep when I hit the pillow.

We slept late in the morning. When we got up, we telephoned our offices and were told they already had been informed. We had our usual bacon and eggs and waited. There were sounds from the apartment upstairs, but it was not until late afternoon that the clang of our gate announced a visitor.

We opened the door to a large, fat, white-haired man of great affability. He introduced himself as Detective Bower, addressed us as "Boys," and asked which was Smith and which Douglass. He asked our permission to inspect our rooms, saying that he had already been upstairs. He wandered about, complimenting us on our furniture and pictures, which was silly but made us like him. Finally he sat down, bidding us do likewise.

Leaning back and putting the ends of his fingers together, he said, "Boys, when I was put on this case at 4 o'clock this morning I had naturally never heard of either of you. But now I think I know you pretty well. You wouldn't believe how much can be found out about people in a few hours.

"And I want to congratulate you. Aside from a rather nasty little experience with that librarian in Williamstown which, I am sure, Smith, you will not lay entirely to boyish-

ness, you're both pretty clean. I'm sorry to say such a good report is rare. Criminal investigation all too often brings out unpleasant facts. Such as that when a murder is committed and the victim is married, the widow or widower is always suspected and usually guilty."

There was nothing for us to say, so we didn't say it.

"In the specific case of Mr. Wilbur Foster," continued Detective Bower sadly, "we can find no one who would benefit by his death except his wife, Elsie. She benefits to the extent of $40,000 in life insurance. But she has come forth with a statement that makes two important points in her favor. First, she says she had come to dislike her husband to such an extent that she left him on June eighteenth. A letter to that effect was, in fact, written by her and postmarked on that date. This proves only that, if he was alive on June nineteenth, he could have transferred his insurance to another beneficiary."

Mac spoke up.

"We know he was alive on the twenty-first."

"More on that later," Bower said. "It's a point in her favor. Most wives who murder their husbands claim they loved them dearly.

"The second point in her favor is that she has the right kind of alibi. She says she took the child on the eighteenth and traveled by train to the home of her parents in Norwalk, Connecticut. A checkup shows that she did, in fact, stay with her parents in Norwalk from the nineteenth till today, when she says she read about the murder in the papers. But she doesn't try to *prove* that she took the train on the eighteenth. She just says she did, and her parents say she did. That's a proper as against a so-called ironclad alibi."

Bower got confidential.

"Boys, if this were a case of breaking or confirming a widow's alibi, that would be handled by officers who find such work congenial and who are therefore better at it. The reason I'm here, and the reason I've given you these details, is that I believe the key to this case is your story, and—"

At this point he leaped out of his chair, scowling, and shook two large forefingers at us.

"—and I intend to get it!"

He had been so quiet and fatherly that both of us almost fainted. This reaction seemed to satisfy him; Detective Bower smiled and resumed his affable air. He had Mac and me recite our experience of June twenty-first. He had me sit on the bed, where I had been sitting that night, and he and I listened while Mac opened and closed the outside door and walked along the corridor as Foster had done. Then we went into the living room and listened at our door and, by George, we could hear Mac breathing. If he had dropped a pin we could have heard that.

Bower went out in the corridor, examined it carefully, tried the outside door himself, and came back. He asked us politely if we minded his

using our phone, and he called police headquarters. He asked them politely to please send up a detective 'of small stature' and a two-foot jimmy. Then he leaned back in the chair as though time meant nothing to him and questioned us about our jobs, our girls, our speakeasies. He was all leisure until the squad car drove up and stopped with a squeal of rubber. Then he was on his feet and unscrewing a light bulb, a 100-watt, from our reading lamp.

By the time the detectives of small stature (they had sent two) came in, we were in the corridor to meet them and Bower had me up on a stool changing the little bulb for the big one.

"Boys," says Bower, "there are two, and only two, possibilities. Either you're liars, or your invisible visitor of the other night escaped through that access door."

He pointed down to this plumbing gadget which was not over eight inches wide and twelve inches high and which, as I said before, anybody could see hadn't been opened in years. If a midget could have managed to squeeze through that hole, where would he have been? Under our bathtub. I thought Bower must be crazy.

He sat down on the floor, took off his glasses and substituted another pair, called for a jimmy, and he studied the access door. He looked at the bottom and he looked at the top, and then he stuck that jimmy in above the casing frame and gave a little wrench. The access panel had been securely nailed to the frame all right, but the frame wasn't nailed to the wall. The frame was about three and a half inches wide. It had been hinged at the bottom and secured at the top from the inside with a simple hook and eye. The jimmy pulled that out easily and we were confronted with an opening, not eight by twelve inches, but fifteen by nineteen. The pipes for our bathtub were in there, but there was room, too.

Bower got to his feet.

"Boys," he said to the detectives, whose names he didn't seem to know, "I think you had better get a fingerprint unit up before you go in there. I doubt if they find any prints but we'll have to check it."

The detectives scurried to the telephone and Mr. Bower turned to us.

"Boys," he said, "I have no children of my own. If I had, they'd be around your age. Your connection with this murder case is finished and so is mine. If you know a good restaurant around here, which I don't, I'll be delighted to buy you dinner."

Of course we took him to Luigi's, and it turned out that Bower and Luigi had known each other years before. But a good dinner and chianti wasn't enough tonight. We wanted some meaty facts.

Mac said encouragingly, "We see now that Foster dived into that hole, making us think he was a ghost. But I don't see *why* he did it, or *how* he got upstairs, or *who* cut his throat. The mystery is solved, Mr. Bower, but the murder isn't."

Detective Bower put the tips of his fingers against each other and looked at the ceiling.

"No," he said, "the murder isn't solved. In fact, it may never be. I only said our connection with it was ended. But you haven't solved the mystery, either."

"But, Mr. Bower!" Mac said.

Bower looked at Mac severely. I think he was remembering Mac and Williamstown.

"Why do you insist it was Foster you heard on the night of the twenty-first? The medical examiner can't fix the time of Foster's death exactly, but it was some time between the morning of the nineteenth and the morning of the twentieth. On the evening of the twenty-first, therefore, Mr. Foster was too dead to visit you or anybody else. As to how the ghost of Mr. Foster got from your corridor back into his earthly remains upstairs, let me explain."

The chianti had had its effect on Detective Bower.

"In the old days, boys, plumbers plumbed properly. It's true the materials they used weren't as good as you can get today and so had to be replaced more often. But, in those days, when they built an access panel it was to obtain access. Not access to one fixture, or to two fixtures, but to *all* fixtures. If for any reason you wished to visit the artistic ladies on the top floor of your building —"

The chianti had hit Mac, too. "Which God forbid!"

Bower nodded gravely. "Amen. But if you did, you could get there through that plumbing stack. All the plumbing in the building can be reached through that one stack. It was plumbers' standard procedure."

"But, Mr. Bower," I said. "Who killed Foster?"

"Boys," Bower said, "if my buddies find the fingerprints of Elsie Foster on those pipes, or anywhere within that stack, the case is closed and she'll probably burn."

He paused and stood up.

"Close your eyes and listen."

We closed our eyes and he walked a few steps beside the table. Of course, he was right. A limp is the easiest thing in the world to imitate. He sounded exactly like Foster.

"Boys," said Detective Bower, sitting down comfortably, "you are entitled to my theory. It's a theory which I will propound to my superiors this evening in writing — which I would recite in any court of law. But it's only a theory. Pure supposition, with no legal value whatsoever.

"I believe Mrs. Foster planned this murder, having come to think she preferred forty thousand dollars to Foster. I believe she wrote the farewell note on the eighteenth and waited for her husband to come home on the nineteenth. I believe she was packed and ready and had got her child out of the room when Wilbur sat down to read his paper. The fact that he did so, with his hat on, does not constitute justifiable homicide. And homicide, with a kitchen knife, is what I think she did. I be-

lieve she carried the knife away with her, suitably wrapped, and immediately departed for Norwalk. I believe she had no qualms of conscience but did, seriously, underestimate medical knowledge. I believe she drove a car back to town from Norwalk on the night of June twenty-first and, wearing a pair of men's shoes, pulled the limping-footsteps trick on two young men she had sized up as gullible. This, of course, was to prove her husband was still alive on the twenty-first. She hid in the stack and, after you two were asleep, she must have crawled up the stack, let herself out of her own apartment, and driven back to Norwalk.

"The whole thing was risky, useless, and stupid, but it was also bold and resourceful. That's why I predict my theory will remain only a theory. I predict that neither the knife that killed Foster nor the cat that provided the blood for your hall will ever be found. I predict that her fingerprints will be photographed all over her apartment but will not be discovered anywhere in the plumbing stack. And I predict that, although she will not attempt to *prove* that she didn't come into New York that night, it will be impossible to prove that she did."

Detective Bower smiled sadly again, and nodded his head.

"I have never met this lady in the flesh, but I have seen her photograph ditto. I think my brother-officers will do their level best to pin this murder on Elsie Foster but, cynical though it may sound, boys, I don't think they ever will."

His prediction came true. They never pinned that murder on anybody.

FOR MYSTERY FANS — these swiftly paced mystery-thrillers, all MERCURY PUBLICATIONS, are now on sale at your newsstand:

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A WINNER IN EQMM'S PRIZE CONTEST

THE SURVIVOR

by RALPH NORMAN WEBER

THE SAHARA DESERT NEVER seemed so wide before, nor such a danger as it did now. We had lost the caravan six days ago in a sandstorm and now it was just Macomb and I against the shimmering heat, the hot sands, and the cold nights of the Sahara. It was as if the storm had blown away the entire caravan and as a prank had left Macomb and me alone.

Macomb climbed to the top of the highest dune to look for some trace of the caravan, but there was none — no tracks, just sand all the way around the horizon. Macomb said nothing, just looked at me in a blank, stunned way. The vast emptiness spoke for both of us. We knew it was at least 30 miles to the next oasis. I started out toward what later proved to be the correct route to the oasis, but Macomb wanted to go slightly to the left. There was nothing I could do but follow. I didn't want to argue with him out here where every ounce of strength would be needed if we hoped to survive.

The first three days went better than the next two. There was plenty of food, but Macomb drank too much water, and on the fourth day he was completely out; not a drop was left in his water bag.

I'd heard that a white man did not last long out here without water and that they were sometimes optimistic when they became lost, then stubborn, and finally quite mad — stark raving lunatics when they found themselves crossing their own tracks five or six days after they had started out.

Macomb didn't say anything until today, the sixth day. His face was haggard, the pores of his sunbrowned skin dry. He had done all his sweating the earlier days when he had drunk too much water.

He turned around suddenly, facing me. "You swine," he shouted, "you smirking, stinking swine —" Then his face contorted and he turned away with his hands over his face. I suppose he felt ashamed because the heat was getting him and he knew it, or maybe he didn't want to scare me away. He knew that I had water; but he wasn't going to get any if I could help it.

I was in back of him all the time, so when he first fingered his gun I began to get an idea of what was going on inside that thick skull of his. He would keep fingering the gun and then glance at me. I knew what he was going to do; I had seen it done on one of my earlier trips. There were two white men on that trip and myself. One of them ran out of water

and killed the other for his water bag. When he found that it was empty, he remembered that I had water, turned on me, and pulled the trigger; but he'd been so mad at his partner that he'd shot him seven times and thus emptied his gun. I left them, the dead man and the man who was about to die, and made my way back to the oasis. When the officials found them, they didn't blame me. It was a sort of law of the desert. Knowing what these men had done, I'd know exactly what to do if I saw Macomb take out his gun.

We rested during the hottest part of the day, but there wasn't much protection from the heat for Macomb. It was much easier on me. I suppose that was what started him off again.

"Think you're superior, don't you?" he said. "Why don't you say it? It's cool out here, cool, do you hear me, damn it? It's cool. You think you could get along better without me, don't you?"

I didn't answer. I had seen what the heat did to the other white men. Besides, I couldn't have answered him if I tried. I'd heard the white man's language for years, but it never occurred to me to try and talk to one of them. I wasn't going to try now.

"Well," Macomb shrieked, "why don't you answer?" He began to laugh short dry little laughs from a parched throat.

I thought we would both make it after we had started off again because Macomb headed slightly more to the right, the way I had wanted to go in the beginning; but I should have known better. He turned like a whiplash and glared at me. He unsnapped his holster and put his hand quickly on his gun. I stared at him and after a while he turned and went on. I knew he couldn't control himself much longer after that, so I slipped away to the right and by the time he saw me it was too late for him to get a good shot at me. I heard the gun snap twice as I was running over the top of a dune, but he missed. He ran after me, shouting:

"You've got water, you dirty stinking swine! You must have to go on and on, and then smirk behind my back with that damn superior smile of yours. And never one damn word out of you!"

Macomb shot his remaining bullets wildly, and I stopped and waited for him. He would be weak now.

When he caught up with me I could see the knife in his hand, the blade gleaming in the sun. He came at my throat, a raving madman. But my reach was longer than his, and I struck out at him again and again, until he was down in the sand, very still and very dead.

I left Macomb and headed straight for the oasis, wondering if my master would call me a dumb stupid beast for coming back alone. After all, it wasn't my fault; Macomb was the one who wanted to go to the left, and even if I could talk the white man's language Macomb would never have listened to a camel.

WINNER OF A SPECIAL AWARD

Special award for a very special story . . . Here is a tale that is leisurely and literate, amusing and amazing, fantastic and fascinating — a sheer pleasure to read! Actually, it is three stories rolled into one: the duel between Max Beit, the hypnotic showman, and Theodore Simmonds, the free-lance journalist with the encyclopedic mind — set against the background of a sinister and macabre museum with its relics of bygone crimes — and interwoven with the trail of The Painted Lady, an omnipresent but invisible cat burglar . . . could you ask for more?

The author came to write the story because for many years he and his wife (the world-famous detective-story writer, Margery Allingham) have had a flat in Great Russell Street, immediately next door to the British Museum. Indeed, that whole section of London contains the most vivid associations for Youngman Carter. For one thing, the British Museum was the first public building to which he was dragged as a youngster, although he confesses now that he greatly preferred Madame Tussaud's. For another, the author also lived at Seven Dials during that period in his life when he was an impoverished art student. Yes, the entire area still represents to Youngman Carter the artistic and esthetic core of the metropolitan world — the very center of "London Nights' Entertainment."

LONDON NIGHTS' ENTERTAINMENT

by YOUNGMAN CARTER

THE HOUSE OF PETER THE BLIND is closed. No trace of the foundations remains in Postillion Street and its only memorial is to be found in paragraphs under the heading *Exhibitions* in obsolete guide books to London.

Like its half-brother, the Black Museum at Scotland Yard, it was devoted to crime, but it enjoyed one paramount advantage over that interesting establishment by the Thames: it was open to the public daily (Sundays excepted) upon the payment of one shilling and sixpence, children half-price.

Before the war, most uncles planning educational tours for their provincial nephews, and all Londoners playing host to the English-speaking peoples, included the tall Georgian dwelling on their list, in a bracket with the British Museum. The two exhibits were within a stone's throw,

ideally suited for the second morning of sightseeing, and leading naturally to Madame Tussaud's or the Zoo for the afternoon.

I remember my first visit, under the benevolent wing of my Uncle Harry Forsdyke, most eccentric of Edwardian philosophers. Even at the age of ten the gloomy depths of the house were impressive and the voice of Max Beit was capable of lowering the temperature of the room like a dead man's hand plucking at your heartstrings. It was as deep and as cold as a dungeon well; even to recall it today is to feel the sun go unexpectedly behind a thundercloud.

Max Beit was more than a guide: he was the very essence of the place. He was an elocutionist and an actor of the first order. Without him the museum would have been just another collection of relics of dubious value, made significant only by their macabre associations. Before he took his sheepish parties around, he would stand where a single shaft of light, arranged through blue glass, would filter down on him and, as if by accident, light the dome of his skull and emphasize the dark caverns about his eyes. He could silence the most brazen tourist by this icy mesmerism even before he spoke.

"Here in this room you are in the presence of murder."

The words, so familiar still to innumerable middle-aged cockneys, never failed to produce on me the dramatic effect of the opening of the Fifth Symphony. To conjure them back is to invite that involuntary spasm of the spine which makes people say that someone has walked over their grave.

"Here were planned the deaths of Doctor Carmichael, of Lottie Soames, of the younger Bertini, and of many others. It seems certain that Trefusis, once Lord Mayor of London, drank his poison and died in terror within these four walls."

Max must have conducted hundreds of thousands of sightseers over the old house, but his grip on his audience never failed and his performance was as ominous and icy the last time I heard it as it was in the golden era of Uncle Harry Forsdyke.

Very few people, I suppose, realized that Max Beit was the owner of the place. He called himself the Curator, but the house and the exhibits were all his personal property. He bought them in 1904 from Van Tromp the showman who went bankrupt very sensationally that year and involved Royalty in the crash.

At first the profits from this investment cannot have been very large. Success must have come like the slowest of avalanches, but its culmination is not to be doubted.

Peter the Blind himself, it appears, lived in that grimy house in Postillion Street from 1874 until his death in 1888. It was a magnificently romantic period, the heyday of fogs, hansom cabs, gas lamps, untold wealth, and, of course, crime.

In the public mind Peter the Blind is associated with Jack the Ripper,

Professor Moriarty, Charles Peace, and Sherlock Holmes.

He was not, in fact, blind, but his white stick (Exhibit 13) with which he was heard on more than one terrifying occasion tapping along a foggy street, earned him the nickname in Bloomsbury long before his name became synonymous with blackhearted Victorian infamy.

For his career Max Beit is the supreme authority. His book, *Napoleon of Night*, is the standard work on the life of the mysterious Peter Chatsworth Yates, called Peter the Blind, and it seems impossible now that it can ever be improved upon. No man, certainly no eminent criminal, ever had a keener biographer. His researches on the subject never ceased and each time I heard Max's blood-chilling lecture he seemed to have added a new item of shocking or fascinating information.

In the 80s and 90s disappearances and mysterious deaths were commoner than they are now. How far Max embellished his subject's record we may never rightly discover, but he lists no less than twenty-four victims in considerable detail and infers at least as many more.

At one time he claimed — though the reason for this is hard to find — the wretched Marie Gomez as Peter's handiwork, but the authorities now place her death with the Ripper's.

Peter was certainly far more catholic in his tastes than his distinguished contemporary. He murdered for pleasure, for gain, and sometimes for self-preservation. His house contained almost every means of slaughter known to the Victorians and his medicine cabinet alone held more poisons than ever a Borgia wielded.

As a child I coupled him in my imagination and my nightmares with Old Pew of Treasure Island, and even now the sight of an ill-lit London street gives me a shiver, for I half expect to hear the tap-tap of that white stick along the gutter and to see that monstrous vulpine shadow flapping inexorably towards me.

The stick itself enjoyed a prominent place in the museum. A late acquisition probably, for only on my recent visits do I recall seeing it, although it always featured in Max's discourse. It was, you remember, a swordstick.

To such a figure and in such a period, legend attaches itself easily. In the 1900s a series of penny dreadfuls added their quota of obviously apocryphal adventures. Among collectors such as Ernest Turner these highly colored, though fading, little paper volumes have had a fair vogue, but they contain only a few authentic grains. In them Peter is shown as a Machiavelli of modern crime, the most sinister murderer of all time, a fiend whose powers were both scientific and magical. The "blood" writers of 50 years ago were not particular.

With Max Beit's *Napoleon of Night* came the first and indeed the only semblance of a balanced and authenticated story. It was quite brilliantly done. The work has something of the quality of Strachey's *Eminent Vic-*

torians, and it is, as the catalogues say, "copiously illustrated."

Barnabus, who first published it in 1930, did extremely well. There was one vogue for biographies at the time and another for crime; *Napoleon of Night* rode to best-sellerdom on the crest of both waves.

The dates and details of the "authentic" crimes were set out and analyzed with clarity and no little sardonic wit; the "doubtful" cases were judged impartially on the available evidence. The index is commendable as such and is as well an incomparable guide to the period. Beit must have made a good deal of money out of the book, for it not only cemented Peter into the Victorian scene but established the author as an unquestionable figure of literary importance in London life.

It was at this time that I began to know Max really well. He was a member of the Corduroy and, of all curious things, a keen card player. In those days I spent too many of my evenings in that most respectable of Bohemian clubs and was modestly expert myself. He played with a sort of vicious accuracy which could be, and generally was, devastating. My own play, though vastly inferior, is after this style, which is probably why he came to be civil to me.

His first nod to acknowledge my existence — I mean, as a player — came after several years of acquaintance. It was as unnerving as a sudden bow from a Sphinx, but it said quite clearly that I was accepted. I became, as nearly as one might, a crony of his.

There was something about the lighting of the card room which suited Max. He would sit back in the shadows watching the other players, very much as he stood in his own museum lecturing his audience in that inhumanly deep voice of his. He was in every way a terrifying opponent. His tongue was bitter enough, but with the depth of his intonation he could give a sinister twist to the most casual of observations. I think most of us could feel our spines quiver a trifle when he said, "Singularly ill-advised. I fear I shall inevitably profit from your lack of judgment."

There is a portrait of Max in the dining room (just above the buffet table) painted by James Pryde. It is a fine piece of subdued bravura, very nearly one of the great portraits of our time. Certainly the whole spirit of the subject is there — neither Rembrandt nor Reynolds would have disowned the composition nor the handling of the paint; but it has just that extra touch of the theatre which stops it from being completely dramatic at the second glance.

It was Simmonds who damned it for most of us. "It looks," he said, "like Irving trying to play Hannen Swaffer," a criticism which was so devastatingly true that it was repeated to every member of the Club and certainly a dozen times to Max.

Simmonds described himself as a jobbing journalist: he looked like a caricature of all one's less beloved schoolmasters, and his pockets one

suspected were full of string, toffee, and catapults confiscated from small boys. He wore his dirty white hair too long over his collar and affected (there is no other word for it, since it was out of character) a large black sombrero. He took snuff from a tortoiseshell box and seemed always too consciously Bohemian in appearance to be quite genuine. The inner Simmonds was a schoolmaster.

Erudition was his stock in trade: he could and did knock out remarkably informed articles about politics in the Antipodes, aluminum deposits in Nova Scotia, or the incidence of Siamese twins in the Irrawaddy basin, at very short notice. He was fluent, speedy, reliable, and possessed of an excellent news sense. If Theodore Simmonds began to discuss the Priesthood of Lhassa or the White Slave Trade of Madagascar, you could be sure that both were due for headlines in the near future.

Whether the dislike he had for Max, and Max for him, dated from his remark about the picture is hard to say. Simmonds had a trick of debunking things with a hard fact and a sniff.

The first open quarrel between the two men was not without a touch of drama, which is not remarkable for they both had a high sense of theatre. Max was standing, as was his habit, beside the table at which a game had just finished. It was towards the middle of the war, late at night. We were all in a state of tension, with one ear half-cocked for the grimmer sounds of the outer world.

The green shade cast its usual horrid pallor over Max's face and the whiter light streamed directly upon his hands, particularly upon a signet ring with a large black stone in it which he wore upon his left forefinger.

Somebody said: "Is that a new acquisition, Max?"

He drew it off and let it lie upon his palm. "A poison ring," he said, "of ingenious and devilish construction. The work of a master, but later than Cellini. A new item for my collection. The last of the Blind Man's instruments."

Several people handled it, including myself. Indeed, it was I who passed it to Simmonds. He took it up as if it were a little dirty and peeked at it through a jeweler's glass.

At this there was a pause. Most of us felt something pungent might be on the way.

Simmonds turned the ring over and over. Then he let his glass fall into his left hand and tossed the ring onto the table.

"Made, I should say — hmm — about three years ago. Viennese in design, but probably the work of the Austrian evacuees now carrying on their trade in Jerusalem." He paused and sniffed. "A silly trinket, Max. You — hmm — should be more careful with your little — hmm — embroideries. You had better consult me in future."

The silence which followed grew more intense with each of its twenty seconds. Finally Max picked up the ring. "I shall consult you," he said,

"when I am next in need of a farrago of vulgarity, inaccuracy, and pompous stupidity."

Fortunately, little Louis Bidon, who was with the group and a bit tipsy, gave one of his delicious child-like chuckles which would have warmed the heart of the oldest carp in Versailles, and after that no one could maintain anger publicly. Max made a casual departure instead of a dramatic exit, and I walked home with him. His living quarters were above the Museum, now closed for the duration, and my own were in Great Russell Street. But he was fuming with a cold venom which stopped him on the corner of Bloomsbury Street as if his heart would fail from the acid which was eating into it. He leaned against some railings and suddenly the moonlight made him look very old.

"That man's mind," he said, "is like petrol spilled upon a wet road. A sloppy assortment of tasteless colors with no depth. He has every sort of accomplishment — I don't suppose you know the half of his interests and his interferences. He's a dabbler, a half-cock dilettante. You may think of him as a journalist. It may amuse you to know he pretends to the restoring of antique clocks. He never mends them. He makes dry-fly fishing rods and never completes them. He backs horses, but in halfpenny packets. His fingers itch for thrills he hasn't the guts to taste. He plays the Bohemian because it's easy. But he achieves nothing. Nothing. Nothing."

He straightened himself. "Forgive me. I expect some company before the night is out. Let us see if there is any civilization or any whiskey up above the Museum."

The "company," late at night, which Max entertained was various and fascinating, and particularly, I think, during wartime. Somehow the streets themselves seemed to have returned with the blackout to their Victorian mystery and the whole scene made the ghost of Peter the Blind a malignant possibility to be glimpsed in the first shrouded doorway across the street.

Max's guests were infinitely varied, but apart from occasional actors, who came, I suspect, solely in order to study his voice, they had one interest in common: crime.

That particular night's flotsam was typical. At 1 o'clock a young airman, who had been charged with a *crime passionnel* and acquitted through the ineptitude of the public prosecutor, arrived not drunk but loquacious. He was a rarity: an aristocrat and a murderer. The Battle of Britain had turned him from an Oxford poet to a fallen Lucifer. His conversation was obscene, Olympian, and wickedly funny. With him was George Braham of Fleet Street who had covered his case for the *Post*, gasping as usual with asthma and memories of even better murders, and a girl with a dead white face and the figure and tongue of a Jonsonian drab, who turned out to be a Junior Commander in the A.T.S. At 2 o'clock the local Divisional Detective-Inspector arrived. He was a

short pawky Scot, a sound member of the Elks and other men's societies, but he knew his London and was not without a relish for the humor, or the gossip, of his trade. The whiskey, a miracle in those difficult times, was abundant.

George Braham lamented the passing of the 32-page paper and the days when he could turn a murder into an epic, and he began to cite instances. "Crippen today would be lucky if he got half a par," he said. "There is no good crime in war because there are no good newspapers to transform a corpse with a well-slit throat into history. Now take Seddon, for instance."

"To hell with yesterday and Seddon," said the airman, "Seddon and Sodom, the Brides in the Bath and Gomorrah. It's all very well for you, Max, to batten on the past, but what about today, Inspector? Tell us that. What will tonight's blackout bring drifting to your desk on the morning tide?"

"Nothing new," said the Inspector, "nothing new, for a level shilling. And if there's any to come, I'll bet that Mr. Braham will get it wrong if he gets a line of it into his newspaper. Breaking and entering, up 90 per cent through the blackout, you know, but still they get it wrong when it comes to print."

"Never wrong on a fact in my life," said Braham, pouring three fingers without turning his head. "I remember out at Box Hill when the lot of us went down to see the homicidal gypsy . . ."

"Never a fact right," said the Inspector, "if it sounds better the other way round. And I'll prove it, even today. Now take the girl you boys in Fleet Street call The Painted Lady. She breaks and she enters and she leaves her handwriting all over the place. She uses scent and she smokes while she's on the job. Very good, and very likely we'll happen on her as soon as maybe. But it has to be glamorous for the lads of the Fourth Estate. 'A rich perfume from the salons of Paris' — 'Exclusive pink petaled Oriental cigarettes' — 'A dark mink-clad figure' — and so on. And what's the truth? The fact is we've never seen her, so we don't know how she dresses. But her scent is the cheapest you can buy — cheap stuff, even now. And her cigarettes come in the well-known yellow packet. As for being pink-tipped, all they've got on their butts is lipstick. Balderdash, George, and bunkum is what you dish out when the papers might tell us more of what's happening on the beach-heads."

There was much more fine talk in this vein, for the pigeon was among several cats, and the attic filled with smoke, whiskey fumes, and the hangover of impassioned wordy digressions.

I remember the whole night with a particular vividness, for it was the last occasion on which I saw Max Beit alive.

It was the time of the Flying Bombs and the V2's, which Londoners called, with a spiritual snook cocked at Fate,

the Doodlebugs and the Gas Mains, and I was by no means sorry to be called out of the city for a month or so. Rumors, however, did reach me, for Louis Bidon, who was a great gossip both in the flesh and on paper, kept me primed with all that he considered civilized.

"The Max-Theodore quarrel progresses with great bravura," he wrote. "They do not speak now and one regrets that one may no longer carry a sword along with a glove and an ivory card-case. At the Club, the porter receives messages and inquiries. They are like the figures in a Swiss weather toy. If Max is in, Theodore must needs be out. If one lunches, the other dines. But from both, what great rhetoric! It is worth the bombs to hear Max pronounce, during one of those exciting pauses, on 'a creature upon whom one's mental heel turns without even revulsion.' Or Theodore: 'Eccentrics of — sniff — an era which is too recent to be amusing. Ballons of conceit which a peashooter could destroy.' It is all splendid and betting is slightly in Max's favor, for though the written word may be powerful, there is nothing to equal the great phrase in that deep voice which we all mimic and, I suppose, envy . . ."

In February of that year I returned to the city and about a week later — it was a Wednesday evening with a cold whip of rain in the dark streets — the shocking thing occurred.

It was about half-past 6 when I became aware of a timid knocking at my door, a sound which I knew subconsciously must have been going on for some time. The little old person who stood outside was so clearly a London charwoman that she had no need to explain the fact.

"You'll excuse the liberty, I know, sir," she said, "but my friend is Mrs. Cook, who does for you. She says you know Mr. Beit over at the Peter Museum and often go to visit him. I look after the gentleman, you see, myself, and I'd be easier in my mind for your advice."

She was a pathetic little sketch for an outmoded joke: my heart warmed to her.

"It's like this," she said. "I let myself into the museum with the one key at 6, but I only go up through it to the gentleman's rooms. He has his own front door, sir, and either leaves his key so I can find it, or lets me in himself. This is the third evening, and I can't get no reply. What with doodles and all, I'm worried. Mrs. Cook and I wondered if — you being a friend . . ."

We went across with upturned collars through the rain and through the shrouded museum, which seemed to hold an even more sinister menace behind those dusty coverings. Max's door was indeed locked.

The little old lady, so like a courageous mouse, stimulated me to take hold of the situation boldly. The door was half-glass, leaded with Victorian panels, and I stove a couple of them in with my umbrella, opening the lock from inside. The half-minute which

followed was and is my worst nightmare. I switched on the living-room light, saw what there was to see, and realized that the curtains were undrawn.

It meant inevitably — for this was wartime and first things had to come first — switching into darkness and stepping across the floor to make the blackout complete.

Across the floor. Avoiding the dead man who lay sprawled upon it.

The charlady was as gallant and gentle as only old ladies who know trouble and have the habit of courage can be. She bent down and touched what had once been Max Beit's skull. "The poor gentleman," she said, "the poor gentleman."

It was hard to say, when the light was back on, if the room had been ransacked or if it was in greater chaos than usual. It had always looked like a cross between a theatrical prop store, a taxidermist's lair, and a lazy artist's studio. Both of us, I think, felt there was no longer any urgency. We looked around summing up what there was to see and to be done.

I am no detective, but presently the weapon became obvious. It was a large stone pestle with a wooden handle, and my guess was that Max had been killed with a single blow. He lay face downward in the midst of tumbled books, trinkets, and papers, and it did not seem to me that he had ever moved again.

Books . . . trinkets. The books were legion, but there were oddments missing. The "poison ring" had gone from his left hand. "Peter's snuffbox," a fine inlaid tortoiseshell affair, had vanished from the mantelpiece; so had a jeweled paperknife, some ivory miniatures of Seventeenth Century villains, Colonel Blood's inkhorn, and Charlotte Corday's little handmirror.

As the old lady and I stood side by side, neither moving nor speaking, the room, which had been very cold, became slowly fetid and close. There was the sickly, stomach-turning warning of decay, but there was an afterthought haunting the air — a perfume which was as out of place as a paper rose lying amid a display of glass eyes.

Exactly as I put my hand on the old lady's shoulder and said, "We'd best get out of here and let the police know," I noticed the last detail. In the big pewter ashtray on the coffee table there was a cigarette stub tipped with lipstick. Another lay in the empty fireplace, and a third had been trodden into the carpet.

For me the picture was as complete and as ugly as a verdict in a headline . . .

We went back to my own rooms and my companion said, "You do the telephoning and tell them what's happened. I'll be making some tea if you'll show me the kitchen." She took off her old black straw hat, put the pin back through it, shook out her coat and hung it up on the peg by the door as if she were used to violent death — as perhaps she was, being a Londoner.

I rang Holborn Police Station and asked for the Divisional Detective-Inspector who had known Max. There

was a bit of a delay and it turned out he was not there. Just as I was bracing myself to find cold-blooded phrases to explain to a stranger, the bomb fell. It was a V2.

The thunderclap of a building having its heart torn out came first, then the hysterical supersonic whine of the bomb's arrival. The windows on both sides of the flat were blown in but the curtains saved us from glass.

The whole house swayed on its foundations and shuddered. An angry wind smacked at our faces, foreign and insulting. In a few moments there was an irregular clatter of debris on the roof above our heads and the air became thick with brickdust. The phone, still in my hand, went dead. The bomb had been very close.

The blast made us both very slow and careful in our thoughts and movements: we were like automatons testing every step to see if the cords of life still worked.

I sat the charlady down on a wooden chair in the kitchen and searched for brandy. This she refused and presently the forgotten kettle began to scream. We made tea before we set out to see the damage and were grateful for our own wisdom and restraint.

The crowd of sightseers, rescue workers, and firemen stopped us almost at my door. The end of Postillion Street was already barricaded off, but even from the corner the news was clear. The house of Peter the Blind and everything in it had been blown into infinity. Only a hole like the socket of a giant's tooth remained. Max, his treasures and his vanities, his body with its final secret and above all his voice, which still seemed to echo in my throbbing eardrums, were only a memory, a fragment of the odd backstreet antiquarian history of the town.

I reported the night's adventure to the Inspector, but on the next morning. He made heavy weather of it, promising the impossible, for his phrase, I remember, was, "Well, we'll look into it. Write me a statement of it in your own time." He showed me out of the station himself, walking to the corner with me as if I were fragile, and it dawned upon me that he only half-believed my awkward story and put a mental note against my name with the word *Concussion.*

Newspapers in those days did not report the incidence of bombs directly. Max's death appeared first as an obituary announcement in the *Times*, paid for by the Club, and his career rated half a column a day later in that distinguished journal. It was by-lined (which meant it had been contributed by a friend and had not been part of the usual newspaper mortuary service) and initials only were given — T.S.

Theodore Simmonds — his handwriting was not to be mistaken — was guarded in his appreciation but he was, as ever, knowledgeable and respectfully cordial. He spoke of *Napoleon of Night* as being "a scholarly example of research into trivia, executed with that touch of sardonic wit which will make it memorable among his

large and electic circle of friends . . . still a piece of desiderata for all students of the late Nineteenth Century."

There was no other public reference to Max: the popular dailies had better stories on hand and the Sunday newspapers were hampered by the censor's ban on the location of bomb craters. Without the annihilation of the museum only half the story remained.

At the Club, Simmonds suffered slightly from one of those declines in popularity which move like a wave of schoolboy emotion over any male community, however sophisticated. Here, too, only half the story remained. Simmonds merely reminded us of Max who had been, we felt, the real force of the pair.

This trend was not improved by the contents of Max Beit's will. His capital, which was small, went with the vanished house and contents to cousins in Bath, whose existence he had never mentioned. But Simmonds was appointed literary heir and executor: it was the last ironical gesture from the old master.

The legatee was shaken by this news: he aged ten years in a few weeks, and his hair lost its last touch of gray. However, being a practical if sporadic worker he did not neglect the bequest but arranged for a cheap edition of *Napoleon of Night* by the largest and best of the reprint publishers. It caused a small literary vogue for Max, a little Indian Summer of posthumous glory, and must have made several hundred pounds for Theodore.

But he still wilted. Shifting his interests like a dilettante schoolmaster on holiday, he took up archery, was bitten briefly by the Vintage Car bug (buying a fine Model T Ford which he paraded outside the Club), and invented a not very successful pipe-lighter.

By 1950 the last ripples of Max's personality had reached the final backwaters and were still. There were so many other absorbing topics for club conversation — the Russian Menace, Don Bradman's Retirement, the Painted Lady Still Uncaught, the Linsky Tribunal, and Existentionalism.

What did emerge through the parti-colored passing of the months was that Theodore was slowly losing his grip. He established one corner of the bar as his own, an ominous and not altogether original gesture, and kept longer hours than most in that stronghold of weakness.

He still exercised his extraordinary talent for assembling out-of-the-way facts. I remember the flutter in the Air Ministry dovecote when he published information about the Russian MIG six months before it was official. He had not done more than assemble known details and make logical deductions, but after a lot of hurried denials in Parliament he was proved perfectly accurate.

He did not get actively, demonstrably drunk, but late in the evening he became maudlin and garrulous with casual victims whether they were willing or not.

And there were occasions which

gradually increased in regularity when he talked alone, or to an unseen listener.

On such an evening, when the bar had long been closed officially — though Bates the barman was always around — he caught my eye and insisted that we drink brandy together.

"I see you too seldom," he said and sniffed. "Cold-blooded impartial characters are rare nowadays. Partisanship is the way of it in this year of inelegance. Did you know, by the way, that there is trouble in Odessa? They have produced a new sort of wheat in large quantities in that area. It seems that it is very easy to grow even in the poorest soil. But I digress — I ramble — I spread out my husks before a pearl fancier."

Suddenly he straightened himself and emptied his glass. "You were a friend of Max's," he said. "Now I will tell you something which you will not find dull. Here is a joke, the last and greatest joke of the lot. You know I was — I am — his literary heir?"

I nodded and he commenced another drink. "The joke is on me forever," he said. "A long nose pulled from the pit of Acheron by a tuppenny charlatan. And there is no escape."

I waited and warmed my brandy.

"Hoist on my own petard," he said. "I am, or I was, among other things, a ghost — that is, a literary ghost, a writer of other men's works. I wrote *Napoleon of Night*."

He clearly expected me to be astonished, although in fact I was only half-surprised. Apart from that one work Max had never, so far as I knew, written a single word. A "ghost" had always been a possibility.

Theodore was not altogether gratified by my silence: he had expected some tangible sign of incredulity and there was an Ancient Mariner look in his eye which made it clear he had determined to achieve an effect.

"You may, or — hmm — you may not believe me," he said, "but this joke was doubly redundant upon me. If I was a fake, imitating on paper Max's verbal mannerisms — not an easy matter — I had to infer his voice, as it were, in every sentence. Max was the greatest fake of all time. Listen. Peter the Blind was a myth. He never had any real existence as such at all."

This did arouse me. I protested that the book had been indexed and documented at every turn.

"A fake," said Theodore, and repeated, "an ingenious, erudite, brilliant literary fake. I will now tell you the truth about Peter Chatsworth Yates, the involuntary charlatan of the century. He was not blind, you know, but very short-sighted. He walked with the aid of a stick and wore a large old-fashioned eyeshade. The place in Postillion Street was a second-rate lodging house and the tenants were mostly recruited from the Seven Dials area, bad characters even at that. Peter was a picturesque figure, much chased by children, like the prophet, and gifted with a fine turn of invective. He was a character all right. Daubeny's *Memoirs of Soho* de-

scribes him very accurately. 'Half man, half raven . . .' — you remember the passage no doubt. It is one of the few genuine quotations in the book.

"Peter never murdered anybody. All he did was to conceal two bodies rather inefficiently in quicklime and mortar in his cellars. These people were either killed in brawls or died of drunkenness. He concealed their bodies to avoid trouble with the police. He was not a greedy antiquarian with a fine residence grown rich on the spoils from his victims, but a man who was afraid of losing his livelihood by reason of the attentions of the police, of whom he was in terror. He probably fenced a little stolen property and he had a taste for cheap ornate jewelry, which was all his eyesight permitted him. At his death the relics of two bodies were discovered by the new owner of the house and an open verdict was returned. A sensational pamphlet — again we quoted, although it was full of obvious inaccuracies — was published about him, and that began the legend. A dozen unsolved crimes were laid to his account, mostly deaths or disappearances of people who couldn't conceivably have moved in his dirty half-world."

Theodore had me now, firmly gripped by the lapels of my mind. He paused only to order more drinks and to drown my protestations.

"You have no idea how simple it was to improve on the crude publications of the time — to magnify their importance and to add here and there a touch of truth. Old police notices of missing persons, old photographs from forgotten family albums, penny 'bloods' — they all added their quota of color and authenticity.

"It was exciting, you know. One pitted oneself against the experts in the period — destroying evidence here, creating it there, and deciding where to chance the laziness of any researcher who might follow us. Quotations can tell lies by punctuation. Whole books can be invented if their publishers no longer exist.

"We were lucky at every turn. In 1890 the house was bought by a man called Corney Griffin, who owned a waxwork show. He built on the legend which was already growing and made the place a tuppenny Chamber of Horrors. No fool, our Mr. Griffin. He helped us quite a lot, for he published his own booklet on Peter and made him the centerpiece of the show — gave him all the ground floor and the cellars, in fact.

"He lasted ten years and did very well indeed by the careful encouragement of 'blood' writers. Then he sold out to Van Tromp, who used Barnum and Bailey methods. He helped us too — a lot of photographs in the book had been fixed by him. And all, in the end, to bolster up the most stupendously bogus figure of the lot — Max Beit."

Theodore was so excited now that he lost what was left of his control. He dribbled, let his voice wander from squeaky to husky, broke the stem of

his glass, and poured out an orgy of detail.

In the end the three of them, Max, Theodore, and Peter, were stripped bare: the vain, cynical showman, the literary trickster who had glorified in his own small cunning, and the wretched myopic keeper of a Victorian doss house.

Suddenly Theodore yawned, shuddered, nodded his head once or twice and fell asleep. The bar was cold and stuffy and it was nearly dawn. I let myself quietly out and left the author of *Napoleon of Night* to his dreams.

Now unless our invaluable Mr. Bates was listening to part of the story, and he certainly was not there at its conclusion, no one besides myself shared the secret. Bates is a superb listener, but comment is beyond him and gossip beneath him, so I think there were only the two of us. Theodore was certainly never so garrulous again and possibly his doctor gave him reasons for modifying part of the cause. At all events he gradually gave up his throne in the corner of the bar and took to sipping, as often as not alone, in an armchair in the smoking room.

His walk was still sprightly enough — indeed, I once saw him vault like a cat onto a 15 bus, and he was well past 60. But at the Club he had decided to play the quaint old character in the window, courteous to the younger members and acknowledging the existence of only a few chosen contemporaries.

One afternoon last May, at a quarter to 4 in the afternoon, he died in that chair. He had greeted me fairly civilly and said, "I've just made a discovery about Aphra Ben. Just your line of country. I'll tell you about it sometime."

About twenty minutes later I happened to be looking in his direction, or rather beyond him at the clock. He coughed twice, quite gently, and tapped his chest with a closed fist. Then his face went a cold gray and he lay back.

It was half an hour before anyone noticed anything wrong. I had assumed him asleep and it was Bates, scurrying silent and purposeful through the room, who made the discovery. He stopped on one heel, turned, and went over to the chair in a single flow of movement. After a little while he, Louis Bidon, and I carried the body to the secretary's quarters where there was a small outer room furnished with a grimly appropriate horsehair couch. There was hardly any fuss at all and not more than six people ever guessed what happened.

Our secretary is an abominably efficient person. He took charge of the situation as if he had been an ambulance man dealing with a fainting case.

"Dead," he said. "Dead without the shadow of a doubt. And I should say the trouble was heart failure. Now, Mr. Bidon, you take that cushion away so that he is down flat. It'll make things easier. You don't know his doctor? No? Then we must try to find

him, and at once. That will avoid calling the police and we may be able to save an inquest or any of the wrong sort of publicity. Perhaps we'll find the doctor's name in his notebook. It's awkward, because we don't even know an address for him, so we must find it. He always gave me his bank to forward any letters. I'm afraid we must turn out his pockets."

It was a most repulsive task, but the results justified our clumsy search. We found all that we needed and more.

There were three items which I now confess that I stole from the dead body of Theodore Simmonds.

The first was what looked like a multi-bladed penknife, only it was a more ingenious tool than that. Instead of blades there were innumerable flexible pieces of fine steel, some of them very like keys. One, the largest, was not unlike a screwdriver or a chisel except that it had a forked tongue. There is no doubt about its purpose, or so I am told by experts.

The second was a tin box with very curious contents: six half-smoked cigarettes of a well-known brand. Their oddity lay in the fact that the tips were smothered in lipstick.

The third of my thefts was a small bottle which contained, as the analysts say, a quantity of colorless liquid. The Divisional Detective-Inspector had been quite right in describing the fluid. There was nothing glamorous or exotic about it at all — it was a cheap scent, cheap even for these days.

About the French detective who gave up crime for cuisine . . .

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

by VICTOR CANNING

THE LAST TIME I'D SEEN MONSIEUR Pluvet was in the first November after the end of the war. It was outside a small hut in the hills behind Chambéry, in the Savoy. He looked glum and depressed — glum because it was snowing and he hated the cold, and depressed because even then, I guess, he was hating his job. He was in the Sûreté at Chambéry, and they had sent him out to piece together a family which a returning French soldier, in a fit of insane rage, had dismembered before cutting his own throat.

"Such an untidy man, *mon ami*," Pluvet had said, as we walked down to the village afterwards. "I prefer forgers. They never put you off your food."

And now here he was, four years later, the proprietor of *La Reine Inconnue*, a small inn well off the beaten track. His face was wreathed in smiles as he took my hand.

"*Mon ami*," he said. "What a pleasure!"

"My friend," I said, "What a surprise! The last time I saw you, you were about to become Inspector. Now I find you an innkeeper."

"Come into the office," Pluvet said. "We will have a *fine* together, and I'll tell them in the kitchen to prepare us a nice duck with orange sauce and some asparagus. *Caneton à l'orange* — it is the specialty of the house. People come from a long way for it. It is good you are here today, *mon ami*, for a duck is just too much for one person, but shared between two — it is just right!"

"So, you've given up crime for the cuisine?" I said, as we sat together over our drink. "Do I smell a story in this?"

Pluvet smiled. In the old days it was quite an event if he smiled, but now it sat on his face as comfortably as a cat on a cushion. "Maybe. But deep here —" he patted his chest "— it was always what I wanted. Always I said to myself, 'Pluvet, you are a good detective, but Pluvet, you would be a better *hôtelier*.' Watching people explain themselves, tell lies, open up their dirty little secrets — all that makes me unhappy. Watching them eat — ah, that makes me happy! Also I earn more money making them happy. That makes me happier."

"How did you find this place?" I knew Pluvet. I knew a story was there, and I knew he meant me to dig for it.

"I come here one day. I see it. I

like it. I buy it. Just like that. Simple."

Little by little I got it out of him. It wasn't hard. It was just a matter of patience. It wasn't any accident which had brought him to *La Reine Inconnue*. He'd come out here on a case — the murder of a Colonel Thery who had lived at Chambéry.

The Colonel was rich, retired, and a widower. He was also the president of a curious little club which had been formed in Chambéry by himself and four other men. They called themselves the Chambéry Club for Eating, Walking, and the Direct Observation of Nature. It was quite a mouthful of a name but, as Pluvet said, when a party of old fellows get together a boyish, fanciful streak often develops in them. In Chambéry itself, they were known as the *Ga-Ga's*. Not that they were ga-ga, however. Each one had his head well screwed on, and they were all men of good position.

There was the Colonel, a hell of a bore apparently when you got him on the subject of Algeria; there was a lawyer, Avocat Rochelle, a plump little man with a mind like a razor blade; a Monsieur Delabord, who was a factory-owner; André Justand, a political writer whose books were well-known in France; and a Monsieur Sainte-Verde who ran a prosperous finance company of the kind which offers to advance money without security, but never does.

"These five," said Pluvet, "they have a little ritual which goes on almost every fortnight during Spring and Summer. Every other Sunday they hire a car and drive out from Chambéry and breakfast at some little village. Already on the map they have picked out a route over the hills to some other village where there is a good inn. After breakfast they set out. Each man walks alone by his own route, and each man must do the walk within a certain time and, as he goes, he must observe nature, make little notes of the birds and flowers he sees, collect specimens, and so on. When they meet in the evening, they have a good meal, compare their notes, and elect a winner on the basis of the variety and interest of the observations and specimens collected. Childish, no? *Mais oui* — but they like it, and they do it for years. Maybe for all the years they live these five come nearest to being human and worthy people on these Sundays. Until the Sunday comes when the Colonel is murdered."

"What happened?"

"Well, it is like this. This Sunday in August they drive out for breakfast to a little village called Boisne. They have arranged to walk over the hills from there to *La Reine Inconnue*. They have a little discussion about what they shall eat when they get here, but this time it is not a long discussion for the specialty of this house is known and they are all for duck. But there was some argument over the wine, I believe. Then they telephone here and order the dinner and — off they go like a lot of Boy Scouts.

"It is a very hot day. And remem-

ber, they are not so young, and this time they are all a little over their time limit when they reach here. When I say all, I mean all except the Colonel. The other four — Rochelle, Sainte-Verde, Delabord, and Justand — they sit outside drinking beer and waiting for the Colonel. But the Colonel does not come. Then the proprietor who was here before me calls out that the ducklings are ready, and they go in and eat and joke a bit about the Colonel. He is getting too old to keep up with them, no?

"At 10 o'clock when their car is come for them there is still no Colonel and they are all alarmed now. Well, it is not until the next morning that the Colonel is found. A forest guard finds him up in the hills and someone has knocked his head in with a rock and robbed him. It is at this point, you understand, that I come in. I have just been made Inspector. I must make a good show. You know how it is. When you get promotion all your friends watch you, waiting for you to trip. And I have many friends."

"You never tripped in your life, Pluvet. You watch your step too carefully."

"Maybe. But what kind of a life is that, watching your boots all day long? Anyway, two days later we pick up a young gypsy lad some miles from here. He has the Colonel's watch, his ring, and some of the money he has taken from the old boy's wallet. I take him along with me. I talk to him. Maybe I talk a little roughly with him, but all I get from him is that he is passing through the hills and he comes across the body and he robs it. Robbing a dead body, you understand, is less immoral than robbing a live one. Also it is easier. This lad, he is too indignant at the fuss we make over a simple robbery to understand the mess he is in. And it is this, *mon ami*, which makes me think that maybe he tells the truth. So —"

"You decided to look into the movements of the other members of the club who were up in the hills?"

"*Naturellement.* They are all up there. Any of them could have done it. But why? It is always that, you understand, which is harder than the how. All of them knew which way the Colonel would walk because they all agreed on their routes beforehand. Any one of them could have slipped across and knocked his head in and then gone back to his own route.

"You know," he went on, "In a small town — if you dig deep enough — you can find a reason for any man murdering any other man. What do I find?"

"That they all have motives?"

"*Naturellement.* Take André Justand. He has a daughter who is in love with the Colonel's son. The son, he is in love with her — but the Colonel has refused to give his consent to the marriage. He has another and richer bride picked for his son. With the Colonel out of the way, the two can marry — and André Justand idolizes his daughter and would do anything for her.

"Then take Sainte-Verde. He is

rich, but he is as mean as they come, and he has a wife who likes luxuries. What do I find? That when Sainte-Verde goes away from home sometimes, the Colonel was in the habit of entertaining his wife. You understand? Sainte-Verde may be mean, but he still does not like another man giving his wife a good time. You see, *mon ami*, what we find when we dig is not always pretty. Then there is Delabord. He is ambitious with his factory and the Colonel is refusing to sell him a piece of land which he wants for expansion. With the lawyer Rochelle it is even more simple. Poor Rochelle — he is in prison now. He has been embezzling his clients' money and the Colonel has found it out. They are old friends, but even so the Colonel — the soul of honor, you understand — will be forced to expose him unless he makes full restitution by a certain date. When I talked to Rochelle he admitted that the Colonel's death had come as a relief to him, although it had done him no good for his difficulties are now known. But he had expected more support from his old friend. He is a little simple, eh, to expect too much from friends?

"So, I talk to them all. I find out about them, and I have a feeling that among them is the murderer, and that the gypsy boy is just an unlucky intruder. But what am I to do? There is a great deal against the boy — unless I can discover the truth."

A girl put her head round the door. "*Patron, c'est servi.*"

"Come on, my friend, let us eat."

When you're in the newspaper trade you have to learn to put your curiosity on the shelf with your hat when you eat, otherwise you develop ulcers. We ate, and it was one of the best meals I'd had for a long time. There was no question that duck was the specialty of the house. It would have been the specialty of any house. But when we got to the *brie* — and what a cheese, as rich and ripe as a harvest moon — I came back to the attack.

"You haven't come to the point, Pluvet. How did you find this place?"

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"During my inquiries, *mon ami.* I began to like the gypsy boy. I work hard for him, and for myself because I don't want to do an injustice to an innocent man on my first case as Inspector. So I go everywhere. I go to the little inn at Boisne where the party had their breakfast. I talk with everyone. Then I walk across the hills. I walk all five routes, and you know how I hate to walk. And then I come down here and talk to everyone. That is how I find the place is for sale. But I find other things as well."

He shrugged.

"I'll bet you did."

"Finally I go back to Chambéry and I go to see Monsieur Sainte-Verde. He is surprised to see me, but he is pleasant, but not so pleasant that he offers me a drink. 'Monsieur Sainte-Verde,' I say, 'I have come to arrest you for the murder of Colonel Thery.'

" 'Very interesting,' he says. 'Perhaps you will explain a little more? Why me and not one of the other members of the club?' " Pluvet leaned forward and filled my coffee cup. "It is a reasonable question, eh?"

"Come on, you old so-and-so," I said. "How did you know to pick on Sainte-Verde? It might have been any of the others."

"Ha, yes. You see each member of the club paid in his turn for the dinner at the end of the day's expedition. The Sunday the Colonel was murdered it was Sainte-Verde's turn. It was he, in fact, who telephoned to this inn from Boisne, ordering the dinner. He was a terribly mean man, and he knew that he was going to murder the Colonel that day. His meanness got the better of his common sense. He ordered dinner for four only — because he knew the Colonel wouldn't arrive. If he'd ordered for five they would have had to put a third duck on and, although none of it would have been eaten, he would have been charged with it. As I say, *mon ami*, a duck is too much for one, but just right when shared with another person."

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WINNER OF A THIRD PRIZE

Portrait of a Writer

Here are some random facts about Zelda Popkin, author of a half-dozen mystery novels and of such real and moving contemporary books as THE JOURNEY HOME, *about a veteran's return, and* QUIET STREET, *about the sacrifices and devotion of the ordinary people who helped build the new state of Israel. The random facts will paint the picture of a pretty wonderful gal, who sees her way more clearly than most of us in this confused and troubled time. Where the facts are in quotes, they represent direct statements by Mrs. Popkin.*

. . . she began writing at the age of seven and produced a copybook full of poems before she was eight. Her first tangible reward for literary endeavor was a silver medal, awarded by "The New York Times" for her essay on Abraham Lincoln, written while she was in the fifth grade.

. . . born in Brooklyn, she is a life-long Dodger fan.

. . . at sixteen she became a reporter on the Wilkes-Barre "Times-Leader" at a salary of $3 per week — thus tying H. Allen Smith for the all-time low in beginners' salaries in journalism.

. . . "I saved my nickels and dimes until I had $365 in the bank and in 1916 I took them all and turned them over to the Bursar at Columbia University. I left college in 1918 because (1) my money had run out and it is difficult to get along for extended periods on dinners consisting solely of Hershey bars; (2) the classroom began to bore me; and (3) I had met Louis Popkin. I married him in 1919 and until his sudden death in 1945 he was most of my life."

. . . "My old mystery novels still keep cropping up in reprints and foreign editions, and despite three serious full-length novels some reviewers, to my great despair, still refer to me exclusively as a mystery writer. I recommend mystery writing to those who wish to learn the novelist's trade. It will teach them plot construction and pace."

. . . out of a roving assignment for the American Red Cross came her novel of Military Government and the DPs — SMALL VICTORY.

. . . when in New York, Mrs. Popkin lives in a large apartment furnished chiefly with antiques. "I like to live with things that other people have used and enjoyed. It gives me a sense of the continuity of life."

. . . in the Fall of 1948, Mrs. Popkin sailed for Israel. Going direct to

Jerusalem, she shared the everyday life of a civilian population which had come through a siege and now lived at a battle front, with rationed water, rationed food, under constant mortar and shell fire, in what was "officially" a truce. She learned how to bathe in a pint of water, to walk safely through crossfire, and to love profoundly the Holy City and its people . . .

. . . "My diversions are baseball, politics, gardening, crossword puzzles, and that idiot's delight known as the double-crostic."

. . . "A novel should be written at one sitting." In the case of her WALK THROUGH THE VALLEY *the sitting lasted 16 months. "Letting someone read an unfinished manuscript is like walking around with your slip showing."*

JUNIE-NO-NAME

by ZELDA POPKIN

MINNIE ADAMS WAS BOOKED FOR her first murder but the case was nolle-prossed. Mary and Edward Higgins, her "couple," dressed in a hurry and went with her and the State troopers for the formalities. They were brief. When they were over, Edward drove her home in the shiny Packard. Mary carried hot milk upstairs to help Miss Adams sleep. She slept soundly.

Although it was out of his jurisdiction, a young Assistant District Attorney in Boston felt strongly about the affair. "This is not the wild and woolly West," Stanley Beckwith complained to Bill Coyne, his chief. "Citizens — no matter who — do not have the right to take the law into their hands."

"The statute provides for self-defense," his superior said calmly. "Defense of one's life or property. And in the case of a woman, of her chastity. This prowler walks in on a lone female. She's scared. She acts. Promptly. Effectively. Take it easy, Stan." The District Attorney's tone was patronizing, and Stanley, being sensitive, missed no nuance. "The Commonwealth is safe. Minerva Adams is hardly one to go berserk with a gun. Unless she is psycho, which many of our best citizens would, with good reason, refute."

He was wrong. Minnie Adams killed a second time. With a gun. Fifteen months later. The second victim was also a man. A young man.

There were, however, significant differences. The first slaying was done on an August night in the living room of her fieldstone, pseudo-French cha-

teau on the North Shore, the second on an October afternoon in the bedroom of a cheap hotel off Scollay Square.

Since it had taken place in another county, Stanley Beckwith had known the first homicide only by reading what Minerva Adams had told the local police. Hers had been a straight, simple story.

There had been dinner guests, a couple who left early because they had a long drive on winding, narrow macadam to their place at Bass Rocks. Miss Adams, being thrifty, had put out the living-room lamps and gone to her study, beyond the living room, to take care of her personal mail. She heard someone moving about in the dark living room, thought it might be Higgins, and called out, "Is that you, Edward?" There was no reply, save a crash. A coffee table was found overturned, with fragments of an exquisite vase, brought on a clipper ship from China a century before. Miss Adams had taken a revolver out of her desk. The weapon was on the premises for just such an emergency, a vital necessity for a maiden lady living with only an elderly couple on a country estate. The man came at her, she said, and she fired. She couldn't have known that her danger was minimal because the man was unarmed.

Edward and Mary Higgins were in night clothes, in their sitting room over the kitchen, at the rear of the house. They had heard no untoward sound until Miss Adams herself knocked on their door and said, "Edward, please call the police. I've just shot a prowler." She had been calm. Edward — and the police — thought she behaved admirably. A brave woman, with iron nerves. And an excellent marksman.

The man who lay on her living-room floor, staining the Aubusson rug with his blood, had been in his thirties, thin, dark, and seedy. His name was Joe DiSilva. Within twenty-four hours the police knew a great deal about DiSilva through his fingerprints. He had done time in another State for kiting checks and had been three times married and divorced — first to a girl named Mabel in Chicago, then to one named June in Baltimore, and recently to a Shirley who lived in Portland, Maine. Shirley was reached. She said Joe had been a no-good fourflusher who always kept talking about some day striking it rich. Meanwhile, she had to do daywork, house-cleaning and laundry, to support him and their kids. She was fed up. None of his wives turned up to claim Joe's remains. He was buried at public expense, having had less than a dollar in his pockets when he was found.

The matter had got little space in the papers. Routine self-defense.

The second time, the circumstances were quite different. For instance, it was impossible to state with accuracy which of the two in that fusty hotel bedroom had done the initial prowling. The man couldn't talk and Minnie would not.

An elevator operator heard a shot as he was passing the floor. He called the manager promptly. Minnie was caught on the fire staircase, trying to slip out. The revolver, one chamber empty, was in her leather handbag. This time she was pale and shaken and she struggled angrily when the police escorted her to the prison van. A few drunks on the sidewalk jeered. She hid her face from the cameramen. That did her little good, since every newspaper had abundant photographs in the morgue. They made a striking layout, beginning with one in the uniform she had worn as a nurse in World War I. She had been moderately pretty then, an ash blonde, slender, genteel, with a thin Puritanical mouth and a firm jaw. Her hair had grayed as she aged, her nose grew longer and thinner, her jaw more solid, but she had stayed slim. She wore pince-nez and dressed well, in suits, somewhat like the old uniform. Aristocratic, distinguished, the papers described her looks; but with a sniggering *lèse majesté* they no longer used her given name. They referred to her, familiarly, as Minnie.

Edward and Mary were unable to bring her hot milk. She sat in the detention prison, completely uncooperative. She wouldn't tell why she had gone with the man to the Scollay Square rookery, why she had shot him, or what it had all been about. Stanley Beckwith talked to her that first night and he thought she looked singularly tired, as though she'd given up. He wondered whether she really was psycho and thought it possible. Minnie, however, declined to talk with a psychiatrist. She had got an old book from the prison library and was reading Emerson.

Her lawyers — the conservative firm which took care of her lucrative properties — tore their hair. They considered the usual plea, self-defense, this time of honor, but not for long. Would a genteel maiden lady, concerned about honor, have gone with a sailor to a cheap hotel?

The scandal rocked Beacon Hill and the North Shore.

The sailor had been red-haired and young. He had registered that very day as John Maguire and Wife. The big surprise was that he *had* a wife. She turned up a 9 P.M., off a train from New York — a pretty thing with a bangtail hair-do and a pert red topcoat. The wife was shocked and grieved, but she was prepared to stand by her man, living or dead. "John and I were in love," she maintained. "He came up here to get a shore job in the Navy Yard. I had some pay to collect in New York. We needed it to buy furniture. Sailors don't earn a lot. Jack wasn't two-timing me, I am positive."

Stanley Beckwith, with whom she spoke, was positive, too, but for another reason. A gray-haired Boston spinster was hardly likely to catch a sailor's fancy.

"There's a reason," John Maguire's wife maintained somberly. "It can't be at all what it seems."

Again, Stanley agreed.

The day clerk had no recollection of such an odd couple standing together at his desk to sign in. He voiced the opinion that Maguire must have registered before Minnie Adams came. The elevator operator vaguely remembered taking the woman upstairs. The room showed no signs of violence or debauchery, not even a bottle or a used glass. The victim had been fully clothed and the bullet fired at long range — the length of the room, it was estimated, as though it had been a parting shot.

Betty Maguire had an ally in Stanley Beckwith. Inadvertently, too, she had an ally in Angela Carroll, Miss Adams's secretary. Angela provided the proof that it wasn't what it had seemed.

The shooting had hit young Angela especially hard. She was fresh out of Radcliffe, had had her job only two months, and was thrilled by its possibilities. Minnie was chairman of the board of directors for North Shore Music Week, head of the Fine Arts Festival, and treasurer of the Citizens' Committee for Good Government — she had her generous executive hand in all sorts of things. Angela had looked forward to contacts in the house on Louisburg Square with important and interesting people, but she hadn't counted among them the District Attorney's staff.

"Are you absolutely sure," she demanded of Stanley Beckwith next morning in the library of the Adams house, "that it was Miss Adams and no one else in that room with the sailor?"

"Not even Miss Adams denies that."

"Then there must be a reason, a very deep reason," Angela said.

"There must be, indeed," Stanley said.

Angela gave the Assistant District Attorney a more than passing glance. Lincolnian, ruggedly honest, idealistic, her mind registered. He might turn out to be one of the interesting people after all. She was glad she had worn her snug gray sweater today. "Perhaps I can find out," she said.

Mr. Beckwith smiled. "Perhaps you can help, if you will. Will you?"

"Why, of course." The tone of his voice puzzled her.

"There's no reason why you should not wish to help Miss Adams, is there?"

She bristled. "There is not. I've only been here a short time. It's been hectic, but I respect and admire her very much."

Mr. Beckwith nodded. "That was the general attitude," he said.

"Can I visit her? Bring her her mail?"

Stanley thought that might be arranged. "It'll have to clear through the prison office. The letters are censored."

Angela said, "Oh!" and she gulped. "I hadn't thought of that. All this is so new and disturbing." She looked at him in a way that hoped he might realize she required comforting, but he merely said sternly, "Miss Adams is charged with homicide. She has not yet been admitted to bail. Her lawyers

are fighting for habeas corpus but I doubt it can be arranged. A *second* murder, you know."

"It's frightening, isn't it?" Angela shivered delicately and thought this was the moment for Mr. Beckwith to put a protecting arm around her. She would repulse him, of course, but that was the gambit.

He merely crossed his long legs. "Now be a good girl," he said, "and let me see what mail you plan to bring to Miss Adams."

She frowned. "I don't know if I should. I don't want to hurt her. I certainly don't."

"This is a criminal matter. When one commits a capital crime, he pretty much ceases to be a private person." When he spoke that way, inexorable embodiment of the law, Mr. Beckwith was not attractive. "It's barely possible that by giving us access to Miss Adams's correspondence and files you may help and not hurt." He leaned back, waiting. "We could get a court order, you know. I prefer cooperation to force."

She made a little face of protest, as the circumstances seemed to require, but she opened the top drawer of her antique kneehole desk and took out a small stack of mail. "Today's," she said. "There hasn't been much. And three phone calls. One of them was sorry and wanted to know what I knew. The others were nasty. Obscene."

"To be expected," he said.

She gave the letters to him. "I've opened all but one," she said. "It's marked personal. I never open the ones marked personal."

Mr. Beckwith took the letters. "Are there many of those?"

"Hardly any. Miss Adams is a public figure, you know."

The personal letter was in a small envelope, of cheap stationery. He set it to one side as he riffled the opened mail. There were bills — from S. S. Pierce for groceries, from Jordan Marsh for household goods, from a cabinet-maker for repairs to a desk. There were communications from organizations, asking advice or donations. Someone invited Miss Adams to Varnishing Day at a local gallery, another to a dinner party. Someone wrote that Constance was sorry she'd not be coming to tea because her uncle had died.

Stanley put down the sheets, took up the small envelope, and examined it. It had a Norfolk, Virginia, address on its flap. He slit the envelope carefully.

"*Dear Mimi.*" The salutation startled him. Who on earth would address Minerva Adams as Mimi? "*I didn't mean to bother you,*" he read. "*But somehow things have piled up and I don't seem to be able to get out from under. Ever since Joe walked out on me, I've had one kind of hard luck after another. I had a job as a waitress here. I was making out pretty good but I had to quit because I was sick. Something wrong with my insides. The doctors say I need an operation and where the money's going to come from I don't have any idea, and who's going to*

take care of Sheila while I'm in the hospital? She's been having one cold after another. This room we have down here is in an old house and it's always damp. I sometimes think of the lovely summer I had at your place when Alma brought me to visit. I wish Sheila could have something like that. But I haven't had any luck, not since Alma died. I didn't want to write you but I thought you could find some way to help Sheila and me. I just have no place to turn. There is that other way, but I swear I kept my promise to you never to try that again. I'm just so miserable, I sometimes think the best thing for Sheila and me is to turn on the gas. Forgive me for bothering you. I hope you are well.

Sincerely,

June."

Stanley's Lincolnian face was sad as he laid the letter down. "Who is June?" he asked.

Angela shook her head. "I've never heard of her."

"Did Miss Adams save all her correspondence?"

Angela was certain she did.

"And check stubs?"

"Yes. She was methodical. She had to be, with all her activities."

"Take a look," he said. "A good look. See whether you can find any other letters from June. Or checks made out to her." He sat back, his long fingers making a teepee, his forehead creased. "June DiSilva," he said suddenly. "Look for that." He got up. "Look in her desk as well. Or shall I?"

"I'd rather I did." She smiled at him tentatively. "I'm being cooperative. Really and truly. If she's a murderer, I hate her as much as you do. If you don't trust me —"

He answered her smile. "I trust people. That's the trouble with me. Now I'll take a look around."

The red brick on Louisburg Square had dignity, charm, luxury, and today a funereal hush. In its parlor antique mahogany gleamed, the brass fender and fire tools shone. Family portraits in gilt frames looked down from the walls. Six generations of Adamses, pale New England ladies and gentlemen with narrow noses, thin mouths, and firm jaws — patricians, without weakness or loveliness. Purple glass in small panes softened the morning sun.

He stood a moment looking through to the tiny fenced square. The leaves on its trees had already turned dry. As he watched, a few fluttered and fell. A wind was blowing through Louisburg Square.

The stately dining room had its mahogany and family portraits, too. The silver tea-set glowed.

He climbed the staircase to the second floor. The large front bedroom with the canopied bed, he decided, must be Minnie's. She lived primly there; no ruffles or lace or gewgaws. He opened a closet. Her garments hung in a row, her shoes and riding boots stood like soldiers beneath. He tugged at a dresser drawer and changed his mind. This was no house in which to be mistaken for a prowler. He went back downstairs — all the way down, to the basement kitchen.

Edward and Mary Higgins sat at the kitchen table polishing flatware. He told them who he was. Edward looked at him dubiously but said he guessed it was all right. Miss Adams's lawyers had called and told them to cooperate. This would be cooperation, wouldn't it?

Stanley pulled a chair to the table and said it would. "How long have you been with Miss Adams?"

Mary Higgins pursed her mouth. "You'd want me to be telling my age. I was upstairs girl for her mother when I married Edward."

"She was a slip of a thing," Edward said. "How could I have guessed she'd be runnin' to fat?"

"When did her mother die?" Stanley asked.

They looked at each other. Edward answered. "It was when Miss Minnie was nursing over there in the war."

"And her father?"

"He was alive, I'd say, six years after that," Mary Higgins replied. "After she came home, I mean. It was good she came home, him being alone. When was it, Edward, he passed on?"

Edward laid down his polishing cloth. His lips moved silently, calculating. "Nineteen twenty-three," he said at last. "In January."

"Oh, he'd have been put out about this," Mary cried. "He was a one for morality. I remember one time you and me, before we was married, he caught us kissing —"

"Hush, you!" Her husband scowled. "The lawyers told us to stay on the job till Miss Minnie got back." He sighed. "What else would we do? At our age it wouldn't be easy to go lookin' for jobs."

"Mrs. Higgins," Stanley said. "Did people call Miss Adams Mimi?"

"Mimi?" Her old face wrinkled up. "I don't know as I ever heard anybody —"

"Sure you did, Mother," her husband put in. "That would be Miss Alma, her that was nursing with her over there in the war."

Stanley drew his chair close and pulled out his pipe. "Did a child named June ever visit Miss Adams on the North Shore?"

"June?" Mrs. Higgins's faded eyes squinted. "June, did you say? June what?"

"I don't know."

"There was so much comin' and goin'—"

"Wait a minute." Edward held a forefinger up. "Seems I remember. Came up with Miss Alma one time."

"That's the one," Stanley said.

"I knew I remembered." He was pleased with himself. "They came up the summer after Mr. Adams passed on. Little, skinny thing. About seven — eight years old."

"Miss Alma," Stan prodded. "What did you say her last name was?"

"I didn't say," Mrs. Higgins snapped.

"Now, Mother." Edward stroked her arm. "We called her Miss Alma. Just that. I remember she come from somewheres down South. Talked long-drawn out. Nice person. A better mother no child ever had."

"She wasn't her mother," Mary Higgins said. "I remember that plain. It was an orphan child she brought back from the other side."

"They only came here once?" Stanley asked.

Mary's face clouded. "She didn't want 'em again. Not after the jewelry. A brooch with diamonds — the horseshoe she got from her mother — disappeared. Then an opal ring of hers —"

"I wouldn't bring that up now," Edward said uneasily.

"And why not? They found little June had been takin' the things. And her and Miss Alma was never asked after that."

Mr. Beckwith thanked them and returned to the library. Angela looked weary. She frowned at his pipe. "It isn't done. Smoking, I mean. Oh, I guess it doesn't matter any more. . . . I've hunted and hunted. Files and check stubs. Even her desk. Not a thing."

"Miss Adams was careful." He picked up the letter. "If you don't mind," he said, "I'll take this to her myself."

A prison matron led Minnie out. In the Hoover apron which was the jail uniform, she looked like a lean New England housewife.

"Miss Adams," Stanley Beckwith began as soon as she had seated herself, "who is June?"

A startled glimmer flickered in her eyes and was instantly gone. "Daughter of a friend," she said stolidly.

"June's in trouble," he said.

"She would be," she said.

"Do you want to help her?" he asked.

"I have," she replied.

He gave her the letter and watched her face while she read it through. No muscle quivered. "Thank you for bringing it." She let the letter lie in her lap.

"Do you want to help her?" he asked again.

She shook her head. "It's too late for that," she said.

"What's her last name?"

She shook her iron-gray head. "I don't know."

"It couldn't be DiSilva?" he asked.

Her indifferent gaze lingered momentarily on his face. "It could be and could not be," she said.

He boarded a plane for Norfolk next morning. The evening before, he took Betty Maguire out for a steak. "Did you and Jack ever live in Norfolk, Virginia?" he asked casually.

"Not I," she said. "I'm a Brooklyn girl. Born and raised."

"Jack ever go there?"

"All sailors get to Norfolk," she said. "It's a port, like Marseilles. What's that got to do with anything?"

"Maybe everything," he said. "Maybe nothing at all."

It was a mean run-down street, abutting a Negro district. The sagging houses were frame, with broken shutters. The children who played on the street looked sallow and badly cared for. Before the house whose number

had been on June's letter two small girls were skipping rope.

"Is one of you Sheila?" Stanley inquired.

"Five, six, pick up sticks . . . No suh," one girl answered breathlessly. "Seven, eight, lay them straight."

"You missed. . . . She's upstairs gettin' packed." The other child seized the rope.

"Which floor does Sheila live on?" He asked the girl who had missed.

"Second. Back. You from the Welfare or the Probation?" the child asked him.

The musty hall was all but pitch-black. It smelled bad.

He knocked on the second floor rear door. A frowzy woman in a bedraggled housecoat opened it. "Are you June?" he asked.

"What's she done now?" the woman muttered before she called over her shoulder, "June, here's another one."

A child came running, a small, wizened girl with coal-black hair, challenging black eyes, and a skin bluish white, like watered milk. "My mother's busy," she said. "What y'all want?"

"You're Sheila?"

The child's glance was curious and the least bit frightened. "How come y'all know my name?"

"Who is it, Sheila?" a woman called waspishly.

He stepped in, past the frowzy woman. The child tried to bar his way. "My mother ain't dressed," she whimpered.

He stopped on the threshold of a narrow, cluttered small room where a barefooted woman in a ragged pink slip stood packing a battered suitcase. She was the thinnest woman he had ever seen, bones prominent on her chest, face hollow-cheeked. Her light blonde hair was in curlers. She wore no make-up and she looked ravaged and sick. But the face was familiar. He had seen it before. In a dozen gilt picture frames on Louisburg Square.

She looked down at her slip, blushed, and reached for a soiled cotton robe on the unmade bed.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I shouldn't have walked in like this. I didn't want to miss you. As it is —" He glanced at the valise. "I was almost too late."

"We don't go till the 6 o'clock bus," she said.

"I came about Mimi," he said.

"Oh." Her eyes narrowed. "She sent me the money." She knotted the robe at her waist. "You didn't need to check up," she said wearily. "We're going. Like I said I would."

He tried to show nothing, nothing at all. "I wanted to make sure," he said quietly.

"You can take my word." She blazed with sudden anger. "Didn't I always do what Mimi told me to?" She looked down, at the dusty, uncarpeted floor. "At least I tried," she muttered.

He waited until the anger ebbed from her face before he said, "Mimi's in trouble now. Bad trouble. Would you like to help her?"

Her lower lip quivered. "If she

wants me to. Only if she wants me to." She sat down on the edge of the bed. "He didn't say anything about me helping her. All he said was Mimi's lawyer wired him to bring me money and for us to go away from Norfolk. You're from her lawyer, too, aren't you?"

"In a way," he said. "Where were you thinking of going?"

A secretive smile curved her lips. She shook her head.

"Florida," the little girl said suddenly. "You said we'd go to Palm Beach."

Her mother turned to glower at her, squatting on the bare dirty floor, her elfin face alert. "Okay. Florida," June said. "I figured I could get work easy there. And Sheila'd be out in the air."

Stanley shook his head. "Not Florida. Boston," he said.

She blanched. "Mimi said not to. Never to come . . ."

"Because of the brooch and the ring?" he asked.

Her eyes bugged. "Who told you? Nobody knew that, not even —" She broke off to lean over and give the child a hard nudge. "You go downstairs and play, Sheila. I'll call you." She closed the door carefully behind the child, sat down again on the bed, and covered her face with her hands. Then she let her hands down. "I've done time," she said in a small voice. "I used to steal things."

"Mimi never told anybody," he said softly.

Her shoulders rose. "I've been such a lot of trouble to her. I just can't help myself." She started to cry and asked him if he had a cigarette. He lit one for her, asking, "Did you ever know a sailor named Maguire?"

The wisp of a smile reached her face. "Jack? Sure. He was a sweet kid."

After that he showed her his credentials and the newspaper clippings of Minnie's new crime, and she sat in silence for several minutes twisting her long, fleshless hands. But when she began to talk, she talked volubly, with an eagerness to please, to castigate herself, to justify everything and somehow emerge lily-white. She agreed to come to Boston, to help all she could. Yet Stanley Beckwith wondered, while he listened to her, to what extent she was aware that helping him convict Minerva Adams might give her permanent possession of the diamond brooch, the opal ring, and even the estate on the North Shore and the house on Louisburg Square.

"Congratulations, Stan," Bill Coyne said generously. "Never dreamed we'd get this break. It's perfect."

"On the contrary," Stanley said. "It's precarious."

"What do you mean? We've got premeditation. She carried the gun to the hotel, didn't she? And now we've got motive. Bumping off two guys who'd met the skeleton in the closet. Protecting the noble name, the public image of herself. Blackmail is nasty, but as you yourself once said,

the citizen doesn't take the law in his hands."

"Bill," Stanley said. "Did you ever hear of a book called *Stella Dallas?*"

Bill Coyne frowned. "Sure, I saw the picture. Who hasn't? What's the point?"

"Who hasn't? *That's* the point," Stanley said.

The trial packed the courthouse. Bearers of Boston's most famous names shivered in line at 7 A.M. and fought for courtroom seats. The newspapers had buzzed with surmises of what the defense and the prosecution's lines might be, but until that December morning when the judge used his gavel, they remained surmises. A jury was chosen. The opening speeches contained the usual oratory. Bill Coyne wasn't tipping his hand. The Defense — in the person of a white-haired gentleman with piqué on his vest — was plainly stalling.

The People's case began routinely. The Commonwealth called in turn the hotel manager, the elevator operator, the room clerk, the police officer who had been first on the scene, and a ballistics expert who managed to mention that the single slug in John Maguire's chest had come from the same gun which had previously ended Joe DiSilva's life — the gun found in the defendant's handbag.

Angela Carroll described Miss Adams's behavior on the day of the crime, referring to it as the "trouble." It had been ordinary, she said, the morning dictation of mail, then a small meeting of the Day Nursery Board, in the library, where she had taken notes. After that she had typed the mail while Miss Adams conferred with her household staff. Miss Adams signed her mail, they had lunch—sandwiches and milk, since Miss Adams favored light lunch. Their conversation? Miss Adams had asked about one of the professors Angela had had during her last year at Radcliffe. They had talked of him, and of Shakespeare's sonnets, which Angela adored and Miss Adams liked, but not as much as Browning. After lunch Miss Adams had gone upstairs, come down wearing her hat and carrying her handbag, and announced that she was taking a constitutional; the day was crisp and sunny. She'd be back before 5, she had said; some of the Museum trustees were expected for tea. No, Angela replied to Bill Coyne's question, Miss Adams did not seem agitated. She seemed her usual self.

Angela tried to catch Mr. Beckwith's eye as she left the stand. It couldn't be caught. He was watching Minnie Adams.

Miss Adams, in a black broadcloth suit, decorous hat, and immaculate white gloves, sat attentively listening, almost as if she were a member of the jury.

"June DiSilva," the court clerk called.

June climbed to the witness stand slowly. For two months she had had good food. She had gained weight and looked much better than when Stanley had first seen her in the Norfolk

furnished room. The State's Attorney's office had helped its witness to acquire a good dark blue suit. Her blonde hair had a professional wave.

The whisper of "Who is that?" rippled through the room.

Miss Adams had turned a shade paler, but she sat erect and expressionless. Mary and Edward Higgins were whispering.

June gave her name and her current address in a local hotel. Her age, she said, was 34. She spoke in a thin, fluttery voice, worrying the clasp of her handbag. She looked at no one.

"Where were you born?" Bill Coyne inquired.

"In France, I think."

The judge bent forward. "Don't you know?"

She shrank back before his gaze. "I only know what I was told."

"Who told you?"

"Miss Alma Lee. She raised me." Her voice quavered slightly.

"Where is Miss Lee?"

"She died. Ten years ago." June raised a handkerchief.

"Did she tell you who your parents were?"

"Before she died." The handbag made a little click as she snapped it shut. "She said my father had been a soldier who was killed in the war. She said —" her voice was low, and the judge bent forward to hear — "my mother was Minerva Adams of Boston."

"Say that again, please!" Bill Coyne said. "Louder! So the jury can hear you."

June's square chin rose. In a voice crackling clear, like the first shot fired at Lexington, she said, "My mother was Minerva Adams." And over the buzz of excitement she went on, in the same way, "Alma said I was never to tell anyone. It would hurt everybody if I was to tell anyone."

The room rustled as jurymen, lawyers, press, spectators veered to stare at Minnie Adams. She seemed unaware of their interest. She sat in granite composure, pince-nez glittering, eyes focused upon the eagle and flag above the head of the judge. Then her gloved hands began to flutter.

"Were you adopted legally by Miss Lee?"

"Oh, no," June said. "She just took care of me. After I got into public school, she went out nursing. To earn a living for us."

"By what name were you known when you went to school?"

"By Alma's name. She told people I was her niece. Some of the kids caught on. They made fun of me." She reddened. "They used to call me Junie-no-name."

Something new invaded Minnie Adams's face. It sharpened her eyes, hardened her jaw. It was a strange thing. To Stanley Beckwith, watching, it seemed like hate.

"You didn't get along well in school, then?" Bill Coyne went on.

June lowered her head. "I had a little trouble," she faltered. "The kids used to snitch. Say I stole things."

"Did you?"

Her lips trembled. "Sometimes. When the kids had been making fun of me."

Mr. Beckwith glanced at the jury and saw that they were puzzled. One or two were scowling at the witness.

"Were you, in 1939, committed to the State Reformatory for Women on a charge of grand larceny?"

"You know I was." June's voice rose defiantly. "That was after Alma died."

"Did your mother, your true mother, know of this?"

"Not then. Not when it happened. Afterwards, after I came out. I wrote her a letter and she sent me some money. That was before I married Joe DiSilva."

In the press box, and at the defense table, there was a stir, a hissing murmur that made the judge pound his gavel.

"And after you married Joe DiSilva, did your mother send you money?"

"I never wrote her I married Joe. She would've been mad. Joe had a record, like me. I wrote her after he walked out on Sheila and me. Sheila was two years old. I was up against it. I didn't know which way to turn. I wrote her a letter."

"Asking for money?"

She nodded. "She didn't like me to do it. Every time, the man who brought it — it was always some man sent by her lawyers with cash — told me I wasn't to write her again. So I didn't. Only when things got real bad."

The jury was hanging on each syllable now. Several pairs of eyes were moist. Stanley began to relax.

"Did you ever meet your mother?"

"Oh, yes," June said. "When I was little, Alma took me once to her summer place. She didn't tell me then it was my mother. She just called her Mimi."

"Do you recognize in this room the person you met as Mimi?"

June's fingers tightened on the handbag. She scanned the room deliberately. Her gaze stopped at the defense table. She stood up and pointed. "That's Mimi," she said.

Minnie Adams half-rose in her seat. Then quickly she sank back and clasped her white-gloved hands on the table's edge. Her expression had not altered.

Bill Coyne let the tension run its course before he began again. "Mrs. DiSilva, you have told the court you did not inform Miss Adams of your marriage. Did you, however, at any time inform DiSilva of your relationship to Miss Adams?"

June bit her lip. "Once I did. He was after me and after me. He kept calling me Junie-no-name."

"Did you, by any chance, instruct him to visit Miss Adams on your behalf? To ask for money, perhaps?"

"I did not!" She looked and sounded scared.

"Mrs. DiSilva, were you at any time acquainted with a sailor named John Maguire?"

"I went out with him in Norfolk early part of this year."

"You did not know he was a married man?"

"You never know about sailors."

The courtroom tittered. The gavel came down. Coyne waited for silence. "Did you at any time inform John Maguire of your relationship to Miss Adams?"

June unclasped the bag, then clicked it shut while she said, "Yes, I did. I was broke and Sheila and me were both sick. I was low, and I said to Jack one time, I guess I could ask her for money, she's my mother and she's as rich as God, only I don't like to. And he said, By Gosh, if he was me, he'd make her pay up."

Mr. Beckwith watched the jury. He saw pity and indignation struggling in their faces.

"And you asked him to see Miss Adams on your behalf?"

"I did not."

Stanley Beckwith searched the courtroom. He found Betty Maguire's red coat and bowed head, with the pony-tail. She was crying, a handkerchief at her eyes.

"But why not?" Bill Coyne persisted. "You have testified here that whenever you were in trouble and wrote for funds, Miss Adams sent them to you."

"I did . . . She did." June was stammering and her face was chalk-white now. "She didn't like me to do it. She didn't like to hear from me. She didn't like me. Because I stole. I couldn't help it." Her flat bosom rose and fell. "I was never nothing but trouble to her."

Or she to you, Stanley thought. If she hadn't denied you her name and her love, maybe you wouldn't have had to steal rings and pins.

He looked from the skinny young woman on the witness stand to the older woman at the defense table. And he saw that Minnie Adams's hands were quiet again, and that her eyes were triumphantly at peace. Why, it's over, Stanley thought, it's out in the open. She won't have to pay any more.

Bill Coyne asked one more question. "It is then your belief that Miss Adams sent you money, when you asked for it, as much to silence you as to help you in your trouble?"

"I object," said Defense Counsel.

Bill Coyne yielded. "Your witness," he said.

"No questions," Defense Counsel snapped.

June looked around the room once more before she stepped down. In her brief glance was bewilderment.

Minerva Adams did not take the stand in her defense, but her attorney was eloquent. "In attempting to establish motive," he said, "the prosecution has revealed certain information concerning the defendant's past life. It is not denied. But I ask you to consider the background, the environment in which this gentlewoman was reared, and the fact that patriotically she answered her country's call and served amid the horrors of war on a foreign battlefield. She was young and fair to look upon.

Away from her home, amid the stresses of war, and under promise of marriage, she yielded to love's importunity. The man died. She found herself with child. She dared not bring that child into her home to face her stern father with the evidence of her violation of his moral principles. A loving, good friend agreed to care for the child. But Minerva Adams did not forget or abandon this girl. You have heard from June DiSilva's own lips how her natural mother strove all her life to assist, to protect — yes, to protect her child from the consequences of her misdeeds. . . . Then the final acts of the tragedy were played out. Unprincipled men who were June DiSilva's associates, one of them her husband, sought to utilize her unfortunate story for the vile crime of blackmail. Against that crime, Minerva Adams rightly defended herself."

Several jurors were crying openly when he was through. Stanley Beckwith was chewing his fingernails.

The judge in his charge to the jury, however, put it another way. "By the defendant's act of carrying a loaded revolver to her rendezvous with John Maguire, you may assume premeditation. This premeditation has been established. The prosecution has also established through the witness, DiSilva, a possible motive. The Defense has contended that this motive created a justification for homicide. In the eyes of the law, justification for homicide exists only in self-defense. The Defense has contended that Minerva Adams was a loving mother, seeking always to protect her natural child. You must decide whether in this instance, as in others, she acted to protect her child or to protect herself."

The jury was out less than an hour. The foreman rose. "We find the defendant not guilty," he said.

On the face of Minnie Adams appeared no glimmer of triumph or relief.

Her lawyer touched her arm, whispering. She nodded, pulled the wrinkles out of her white gloves, and left the courtroom.

Stanley Beckwith met a juror in the men's wash room and ventured to ask how the verdict had been reached.

"Why, we felt, all of us felt," the juror said, "that the poor woman had suffered enough. Hiding her shame and disgrace all these years. Keeping her head high. Devoting herself to good works. And trying to help her child the best she could. And then that last straw, those two men coming to blackmail her. One of our panel said it was just like that old movie, *Stella Dallas*. We felt awful sorry for her."

"But how about the girl, June?" Stanley asked. "Didn't you feel sorry for her?"

The juror shook his head. "She was always bad," he said. "Didn't she say so herself?"

The newest "inverted detective story" by a contemporary Master

THE MAN WHO PUNISHED HIMSELF

by ROY VICKERS

LOTS OF LITTLE GIRLS EXHIBIT A PREmature development of the maternal instinct without hurting themselves or anybody else. Torrance Allbury — later Pencroft, later still, McClelland — added a streak of precociousness. She never lavished herself on dolls or animals. Her first "baby" was a real baby sister — unsatisfactory because a vigilant Nanny discouraged experiment. The second was Lyle McClelland whom she selected when she was ten and he was eleven and a full inch taller.

He was an odd subject for a dream baby — indeed, his role in the fantasy must have been that of a wayward son — for he was an active and intelligent boy, though subject to moods of melancholy and self-mistrust. He would faithfully report his doings, good and bad, and she would apportion praise and blame. He would take her reproof as gravely as if it had come from a wise and sympathetic adult, and sometimes he would lock himself in a toilet and cry a little because he feared that he would never be good enough to live up to Torrance.

Not that Torrance was a smug little girl. He himself forced her into a certain priggishness by accepting her as the keeper of his conscience. If there was no reproof from her when he felt there ought to be, he would become uneasy and querulous.

The families lived in the rural dormitory of Rubington, some 30 miles out of London. Colonel Allbury, whose wife had an income, was still on the active list but was employed at the War Office. McClelland Senior owned a small line of cargo boats. A man of kindly intention, he darkened his home life by the unusual rigidity of his principles. Lyle's mother had retained a natural gaiety, but loyally echoed her husband's views on the wickedness of almost everything, producing a moral confusion in the child which was unconsciously corrected by Torrance. Her little lectures — tolerant platitudes echoed from Nanny and her parents — provided the boy with a standard of normality, pulled him out of his bouts of depression, and restored his self-respect.

At thirteen Lyle was sent to Charchester School and thereafter could make contact with Torrance for only four months in the year. The separation failed to break up a relationship that was ceasing to be normal.

During his second year at school Lyle brought Alfred Pencroft home for a week of the summer holidays. Pencroft confided that he was impressed by Torrance — information

which Lyle received without interest. Pencroft came three times during their schooldays, seeing as much of Torrance as he could. Lyle had dates of his own which he would report in detail to Torrance, receiving the normal ratio of commendation and reproof.

On Torrance's side the maternalism was ceasing to be a game in which she played the grown-up. She was becoming deeply interested in Lyle's welfare which she perceived to be bound up with his peace of mind. She was more at ease with him than with any other person. He did not boast to her, and he always listened carefully when she talked about herself. Incidentally, he was the only one of her friends who shared her growing interest in classical music.

Lyle was sixteen when he first kissed Torrance. It was more an idea than a major impulse. In spite of some little practice with others, he made a fumbling business of it. Torrance was annoyed. On both sides the attachment was so deep now that it had seemed natural to them to work off their calf-love elsewhere.

"You aren't going to make a fuss, are you?" he demanded, by way of saving face. "I bet Pencroft kissed you last hols!"

"With you and me, it's different," she retorted. He decided not to kiss her again — and kept this disastrous resolution for nearly eleven years.

Different! That puzzling word cropped up again three years later. They had been to a twenty-first birthday party which became noisy and, towards the end, mildly riotous. The next evening, Lyle reported the party from his angle, sparing nobody.

"You kissed Freda? But, Lyle, she's *married!* You must have known that!"

"What about it? At a party like that! We were all a bit tight — except you — and I don't suppose she even knew who it was."

"Wives are different," pronounced Torrance. "Don't you think it was nasty to egg her on to make that kind of fool of herself?"

Granted the egging on — all the worse for having been unconscious — Lyle was constrained to accept the nastiness. It was the most devastating of her little lectures — it was also the last.

When Lyle was twenty-three, his father asked him to take charge of the branch office in Australia and stimulate business at that end of the line. It was such an unexpected mark of parental confidence that he rushed to Torrance to be congratulated.

"And you'll be away for three years, you say?" She knew he had said it. She assumed that they would marry at the end of the period and she wanted him to make clear that he assumed it, too. But he kept on talking about the job.

She could have asked him outright, without loss of dignity. Or she could have said, "What about me?" — anything that would have forced him to recognize that this was a crucial moment. Instead, a sudden shyness drove her to flippancy.

"You'll never come back. You'll marry a glamorous Aussie, and have fine weather ever afterwards."

"Catch me marrying on the guv-'nor's bounty! I'll have to earn a partnership by getting new business for the firm." He turned abruptly and caught her unguarded expression. "I say, aren't you pleased?"

"Of course I am, you chump!"

"I'll pop in on Thursday to say goodbye."

"No, don't! Saying goodbye is always awful. Just fade away, Lyle."

"Okay. I expect we shall knock into one another before I actually go."

It was she herself who had made him emotionally obtuse. The fumbled, premature kiss of seven years ago had blurred their sense of direction. He was not ready to marry her there and then — so why discuss it?

They did not meet again before he sailed.

In Sydney, opportunities for a social life were not lacking, but he made inadequate use of them. For wives — who, by definition, were "different" — he developed a code. With wives there must be no horseplay. Indeed, even conversation should be kept on the surface and broken off as soon as good manners would permit. The danger was deemed to lie not in possible misbehavior on the part of the wives, but in the ingrained, deep-down, smoldering wickedness of Lyle McClelland himself. It would almost seem that the code was applied to unmarried girls also. Secretly he feared entanglement, but without clearly understanding why he feared it.

Shortly after he had completed his first year a letter came from Torrance. The first few lines told him that she had married Alfred Pencroft. For a few seconds Lyle lost his bearings, drifted in a sea of emotional confusion. There was the feeling that something absurd had happened, and that the joke was on him — if he could but understand it.

He did not take a holiday in England that year, as he had planned. He gave reasons pertaining to the volume of new business he had obtained. His deep misery drove him to furtive little affairs, expensive and of short duration, which brought him only self-contempt and a new unease. For the first time he was carrying the burden of his inflated conscience.

During the next year, his father's sudden death compelled his return. Torrance had been married for fifteen months when they met.

He came upon her in her garden — the same garden. Her parents had made her a wedding present of the house and had themselves taken a flat in London. She was near the gate; Pencroft was busy on the other side of the tennis court.

"Torrance!"

"Yes!" It was as if she were agreeing to a proposition. Without a word of formal greeting they burst into chatter — not about Australia, nor his voyage, nor the death of his father. It began about the flowers she was tending, and roamed nowhere

and everywhere. Pencroft approached without being noticed. He chuckled and retreated, and the men did not meet until tea. Pencroft was hearty and Lyle was friendly, feeling no resentment, jealousy being ruled out.

Over tea, Lyle became aware that Torrance had changed, but the differences were not of the kind one expects when a girl has become a wife. She was more slender than she had been and her eyes seemed bigger, and when she wasn't talking or listening, they looked dreamy, as if she were sad. He tried to evade the impact of her physical attractiveness, though he was aware of detail — of color contrasts, of an individual rhythm in the movements of her body. He knew, in short, that he ought to avoid her.

In the next six months he saw a great deal of Torrance. His mother and sister had moved to a flat in Cheltenham, but he was living in three rooms in the house in Rubington, awaiting, he said, a satisfactory purchaser, though he employed no agent. He was under the impression that Torrance had accepted him on their old footing. Indeed, the outline was much the same. As of old, they kept up a lively exchange of books and gramophone records, and continued to be partners in tennis. The play of each had deteriorated; so they practiced singles whenever they could, bickering and chattering while they played.

There were moods in which his conscience would attack in force. He was trying to fool his own impulse. He was running the risk of earning Torrance's disgust by accidentally revealing that his thoughts of her went far beyond friendship. There was one really dangerous moment of self-contempt — in his sitting room one night, his Service revolver in his hand, while he asked himself where his folly could possibly end. He was saved by the reflection that a man who shot himself for love was an idiot. Also, there were his mother and sister and the business to be considered. He locked the revolver in a drawer of his writing table, where he kept Torrance's scrappy and impersonal letters.

During those months, gossip confirmed his guess that the marriage was a failure — that it had crashed almost before it had begun. The gossipers, who had known Torrance and Lyle from childhood and believed that theirs was an incurably brother-and-sister relationship, did not hesitate to add that Pencroft had very soon consoled himself. If this were true, was it not possible that there might be a divorce? Then he could, at worst, compel Torrance to say that she did not want him as a husband. Not a word against Pencroft had come to him from Torrance herself.

Lyle placed her on a still higher pedestal for her loyalty.

On arriving home one evening in January, he found some new gramophone records which Torrance had left with the charwoman during the afternoon, for his immediate com-

ment. After playing them, he repacked them in her carrier, intending to drop in and return them. As he was leaving his own house, the Pencroft car, presumed to contain Torrance herself, turned into the one-time carriage drive.

"Hullo, Torrance! I was just coming round to you with these records. Send 'em all back except Elgar's *Enigma* —"

A laugh came from the car — Pencroft's laugh.

"Sorry, old man, it's me! Torrance is at the Gramshaws' and I've come straight from Town. I'll give her those records." He slung the case under the dashboard. "Thought I'd take this chance to collect a drink from you for old times' sake."

The heartiness was a little self-conscious. One of the lines of gossip about Pencroft was that he was in financial difficulty. Lyle's suspicion that a touch was impending was increased when Pencroft began talking about his work, which was that of surveyor for the county council.

"It's a prestige job, of course — the pay is wretched. But it helps my private practice — brings me contacts with some of the big people. They're a pious lot, mostly. What I mean to say, dear old boy, is that I couldn't possibly entertain the idea of a divorce. Not in any circumstances whatever. I've told Torrance."

"Where does divorce come into it?" Lyle really didn't see.

"Come off it, Lyle! Surely you and I can cut the flapdoodle. Torrance and I crashed in taking off. Not her fault. Not mine either, to be frank. Call it an unsuspected incompatibility."

"I'd heard as much from others, but not from Torrance. I'm sorry, Alfred."

"At least we've had the sense not to nag each other about it. We were rubbing along all right — until you came home, if you don't mind my putting it like that."

"She and I have been close friends since we were small kids." Lyle was warning himself to keep his temper. "Of course, if you feel that I'm seeing her too often —"

"I don't care how often you see her — and I don't care why. I'm only warning you that, if you're counting on a divorce, you'll be disappointed."

Lyle's thoughts, spinning in a whirlpool, came to rest on the image of Torrance.

"We have music and other tastes in common. But I'm afraid you won't believe me when I say that she and I are different."

"Good old Lyley! You always did pull your own leg with that kind of talk. Why don't you wake up and admit to yourself that you want her? Dammit, I've watched you two looking at each other!"

An angry denial was drowned in Lyle's knowledge that Pencroft was right. The mental image of Torrance became sharper. What was it that he found in music? Torrance. In art? — all he could feel in the beauty of color and line that was in her body. In

Pencroft's jargon, he wanted her — wanted Torrance, the most inviolable of all wives, and with all the bluntness of Pencroft's words.

In that moment Lyle McClelland hated Alfred Pencroft. He still had enough self-control to be shocked by the violence of his impulse, frightened by his own potentiality for evil — and so, indirectly, frightened by Pencroft.

"If you don't mind, Alfred, I think you'd better leave me. I want to get things into focus."

Pencroft finished his drink and rose reluctantly.

"Look, Lyle. There's no need to get worked up about it. Most people seem to know that I have a little friend in Town —"

"That is between you and Torrance."

"Between me and Torrance — *and* you, if you can cut the heroics." Pencroft was positively pleading. "It's only *divorce* I object to. I'm no dog-in-the-manger. I'm only asking you both to be discreet."

Lyle did not answer. Pencroft paused near the door.

"Be discreet — but go *ahead*, boy! 'Gather ye rosebuds' — before somebody else does! Good night, Sir Galahad."

The self-control snapped and the pent-up evil was released, though it no longer seemed evil. Before Pencroft had let himself out, Lyle had unlocked the drawer in the writing table. He shot and killed Pencroft as the latter was starting his engine.

Lyle stood where he was for several seconds, the rain blowing into his face. Then he went back to the sitting room, put the revolver on the writing table, sat down, and waited. The report must have been heard. Someone would turn up in a minute.

But no one did turn up. At the end of twenty minutes it became sufficiently clear that there was to be no immediate investigation. He felt no relief because he had felt no fear, for himself. He had no urgent desire to live, but he had a duty to his mother and sister to do his conscientious best to avoid being hanged.

He put on a mackintosh and gloves. With some physical difficulty he made it possible for himself to sit in the driving seat of Pencroft's car. He drove to the main road. About two miles from Rubington, he turned the car to suggest that it had been homeward bound from London, ran it on to the grass verge, and walked back.

In his own garden, he walked to the rear of the house — to the tennis court. Working by touch, he laid the mackintosh on the grass. He removed all his outer clothing, including shoes, dropping each article onto the mackintosh, then carried his bundle into the house after wiping his hands on the grass. Not until he was inside did he start shivering. He redressed in dry clothes, had a stiff whiskey, and then made a rough assessment of his position.

On the main road, no one had been in sight when he left the car. If he turned out to be right about this, he

would be safe. If wrong, he would be hanged — but that would not be his fault, because he had done his best.

His eye came to rest on the revolver now lying on the writing table. He had taken a course of ballistics when in the Army and knew that the bullet in Pencroft's body could be traced to that revolver — which was, in effect, indestructible. He had read that attempts to burn clothing are nearly always detected by the police. He rolled back the carpet, studied the floorboards. He went to work slowly, determined to leave no traces to the naked eye. In an hour and a half he had replaced the boards above the revolver and the bloodstained clothing wrapped in the mackintosh.

The body was found before dawn, but he did not know this until the evening papers came out. The police interviewed all Pencroft's acquaintances. They arrived shortly after 9. Lyle told them that he had last seen Pencroft the previous Sunday, that he knew nothing of his movements at the relevant times.

As the police were leaving, Torrance's father arrived. Colonel Allbury was an active, well-preserved man in the early fifties, but tonight he looked haggard. He mumbled a greeting, then lapsed into silence while Lyle poured him a drink, wondering why he had come.

"You look a bit done up, sir."

"Yes, yes, I suppose I do. Terrible business, Lyle."

No advance. Presently Lyle tried to stir him up.

"How is Torrance taking it?"

"She's steady. Couldn't be steadier. I was present when the police put her through it. It was very decently done, but there were a couple of hours of it. I'm staying the night, and tomorrow I shall take her back to our flat if the police don't object."

"How can they object?"

"I — don't — know," said the Colonel as if he had weighed every word. After a long pause he burst into volubility. "The fellow was a Bad Hat. Messed up his money affairs, too! Torrance won't have a penny. She'll have to start her life all over again with this scandal tied round her neck."

"Scandal will never touch Torrance." The contradiction was flat, without apology. But the Colonel seemed to have expected it.

"I hope you're right, my boy. The trouble is — whether the killer is found or not — people will wonder *why* Pencroft was scuppered. There was no robbery."

A stupid oversight, reflected Lyle. He could easily have made it look like a robbery and buried the items with the clothes and revolver.

The Colonel accepted another drink which he consumed in silence, as if he were waiting for his host to give him a lead. After hearing what the police had said to Lyle, he got up.

"It's the suddenness of this sort of thing that upsets me. Funny thing! I was down here yesterday, having lunch with Torrance. She played some new gramophone records. El-

gar's *Enigma Variations*. Beautifully done. You know it, of course?"

Lyle nodded. He had forgotten those gramophone records, which Pencroft had taken from his hand and put under the dashboard. The Elgar record had been among them.

"I was going to say," added the Colonel, "that Elgar's music gave me the feeling that nothing sordid can ever happen to you unless you let it. And now look what's happened to us! Good night, Lyle. I'll tell Torrance we've had a chat."

Lyle was puzzled. That was a fatuous sort of remark about Elgar's music. Rather dragged in, too. His thought reverted to the records. Their presence in the car could be used to prove that he and Pencroft had met last night. He had told the police that he had not seen Pencroft since last Sunday. The police must have missed the significance of the records, or they would have demanded an explanation — or arrested him. The records, therefore, could be ignored.

At the inquest, Torrance gave formal evidence and was not questioned. Lyle McClelland was not called. After an open verdict had been returned, Lyle removed his interest from the activities of the police and indicted himself before the bar of his own conscience.

His conscience had always been an unrealistic instrument — hence his need of Torrance as mentor. It was a mental habit foisted on him by his father of which the dominant principle was that harshness to oneself could not be wrong, even though it might be ridiculous and injurious to others.

To plead that the murder of Alfred Pencroft had been justified would be dishonest. True, he had killed a rat, whose purpose was to smirch the soul of a good woman. Equally true, he himself had adulterously desired the same good woman and could therefore claim but little moral superiority.

In his capacity of prosecutor, he easily proved that he had killed the husband in order that he might possess the wife.

The summing-up did not favor the accused. The kind of man he had proved himself to be would merely add to his abomination by offering his tainted love to the said good woman. Therefore, of course, he must never see Torrance again. This solution — this self-imposed sentence — had the great advantage of insuring that, for himself, every single day would be but another turn of the treadmill, on which he would grind out a fortune for his mother and sister.

On the whole, the treadmill was turned steadily enough for the next seven months. He abandoned the pretense of selling his house and lived on in the three rooms, because every stick and stone in Rubington reminded him of Torrance, thereby aggravating his punishment. He added a semi-spartan routine in the matter of meals and exercise.

There were tiny lapses, of thought

rather than deed — moments in which his eye would linger on a slender form, a riot of natural coloring which seemed to hold some facet of her. On one shameful occasion he caught himself strolling in a shopping centre in London, glancing at the faces of passing women as if he were looking for Torrance. Worse still, he took to loafing in his front garden on Saturday and Sunday afternoons, having heard that she sometimes came to visit friends in Rubington, knowing that she must come by train and pass his house, as the Allburys had no car.

This phase ended in August, seven months after the inquest. He was pottering in the drive and she was on her way back to the station. She came into the drive, glanced at the spiritless border of geraniums.

"You leave everything to the gardener!" she said.

"I know. I'm always meaning to do something about it."

They strolled round the side of the house to the tennis court, mown and rolled but not marked. He dried up while pattering about someone who had nearly bought the house — and then their eyes met. In hers there was an uncertainty which stampeded him.

Their kiss held a measure of astonishment for both — as of a dynamic first experience. The philosophy of his father was shrugged off. Why had he not kissed her before he left for Australia? He believed, now, that she would have waited for him.

"We'd better tell Mrs. Watkins first," he said. "She has probably been watching us from the kitchen."

She shook her head.

"We'll have to let people know without telling them," she advised. "It's only seven months."

"I'll see the registrar on Monday morning. In Town, of course — there's one near my office. The fourth day will be noon next Thursday, if that will suit you?"

"Yes, please," said Torrance. "I'm going now. Don't come to the station with me, but take me to lunch at Blainley's on Monday."

Over lunch, he contrived to tell her about his furtive little affairs while he was in Sydney. A slightly jarring note was struck when she failed to reprove him and instead laughed at the idea of taking that sort of thing seriously. The new philosophy, though a little tight in the bearings, carried him through. To nullify one's life could be no atonement for one's sin. By marrying a woman morally superior to oneself, one could bring fulfilment to her by unceasing efforts to follow her example. His first and most obvious duty was to make her happy — which involved accepting his own happiness without making a fuss about it.

In short, he was now prepared to take a lenient view of his act in killing Alfred Pencroft. It was an accident in the sense that the originating circumstances would not have occurred if only he had realized that he had been in love with Torrance all his life.

There had been a mysterious blindness somewhere. He must leave it at that.

By routine, the registration of their marriage was noted at Scotland Yard and the information passed on to the police at Rubington, who made no comment. As a clue to an otherwise motiveless murder it was virtually conclusive. As evidence, it had no existence — nor in itself did it point to any fresh field of inquiry. A routine eye would be kept on the movements of Lyle McClelland for the rest of his life. But this applied to quite a number of known criminals who had as little reason to fear arrest.

Country accommodations were unobtainable in August at short notice. They did not care. He booked a suite in a hotel at Brighton. After dinner they strolled by the sea. A feeling of reverence, akin to melancholy, stole over him.

"I shall use all my energy and my wits to make a success of us, Torrance."

"It won't need either. We need never puzzle about each other again — and that'll be such fun that we won't have time to be strenuous about it."

Her nonsense jollied him out of his solemnity. Later, in their suite, she perceived, as soon as he came into the room, that the mood of weightiness had returned.

"Old Sobersides?"

"Not really." He smiled, but his eyes remained grave. He went to the dressing table, fidgeted with the lid of her manicure set. "I'm trying to live up to my luck. I have to keep saying to myself: 'Torrance is my wife.' Now laugh!"

"I'd laugh if I could, but I feel the same — only, a different way round. Happy-sad! The last seven months nearly broke me up. I thought you must blame me for being the cause of it all."

"I have never blamed you for anything — only myself."

Barefoot, with a whisper of satin, she ran across the room and stood close behind him.

"He must have said loathsome things that made you lose your temper. And afterwards you felt you could never forgive yourself. But it's over now, dearest."

For a few seconds he could feel nothing but sheer astonishment. When he turned and met her eye, his thought was of himself. She had forced him to accept the relief of full confession to her.

"I did not lose my temper — I lost my ethical perspective." As if he feared interruption, he hurried on. "At first, I sat and waited for the police. Then I felt it was my duty to others to save myself if I could. I began to think like a crook — and I was revoltingly good at it. When I got home I had the vast sagacity to bury the revolver and my clothes under the floorboards in my sitting room. That sort of thing! Tragedy was lost in the sordid business of 'dodging the cops!'

"I felt that I had so degraded myself that I must never see you again. When I couldn't keep that up, I decided that it would be less dishonorable to tell you nothing about it than to burden you with the truth — which your intuition has enabled you to guess. Also, I was afraid you would shrink from me in horror. You don't shrink, do you?"

"How could I! I never thought of it as a horror, in that sense. If I had — shrunk from you — I wouldn't have lied to the police about those records."

Seeing that he did not grasp what she was saying, she explained.

"Alfred told me what he meant to say to you. I warned him that you might knock him down — I think I even said you might kill him. I thought I had persuaded him not to see you at all. When I was asked about those records, I knew he must have been to your house, as I had taken them there myself in the afternoon. So I told the police I had put them in the car before Alfred left in the morning, so that he could change them for me at Harridge's — that he must have forgotten."

In his brain, confusion was growing.

"We must get this straightened out," he said, thinking aloud. He wanted to escape from her nearness. He moved away, sat on the edge of the bed, his hands pressed to his forehead. "Why did you tell the police a lie about those records?"

"Don't be dense, dear!" Again she was disconcertingly near him, sitting beside him, her face close to his. "The records proved that you two had met that night. I thought it dangerous — and I turned out to be right. Father said you told them you had not seen him since the previous Sunday."

She saw that she was failing with him. He got up and began to wander about the room.

His thoughts, breaking free from his will, were converging on Torrance in a pattern that ignored time and space. There was Torrance as a little girl seeming older than himself, and wiser — the playmate whose clarity and courage gave ballast to his own life fading into the adult Torrance, revered, loved, desired — and unattainable.

He looked at the attainable Torrance, a riot of auburn hair and green satin and red lips. Not the same as the other Torrances. Not the same woman at all. He shot a question at her.

"Did you realize that you were making yourself an accessory?"

"Legally? What does that matter?"

"Legally be damned! Did you realize that you were helping the murderer of your husband to escape?"

"I realized that I was helping *you* to escape."

"You were. But for your nimble-witted loyalty — to *me* — I should have been hanged. I ought to thank you for that, but I can't."

"Try to understand it, Lyle," she begged, her exasperation lost in her pain. "I assumed that you did what you did because of your feeling for me. I did what I did because of my

feeling for you. It's perfectly natural."

"In other words, love justifies all things — including murder. The creed of romantic degenerates! If a husband or wife gets in your way, bump 'em off — in the name of love. I did that very thing, but I hated myself for doing it."

"Therefore you hate me for helping you?"

He wavered only an instant.

"Ever since we were children I have regarded you as of finer clay than myself, incapable of my evasions and abominations. Tonight you have turned my world upside down, and it'll never turn back again."

She let the silence lengthen, parted the curtains, and looked over the moonlit sea. Presently she sensed that his excitement had passed.

"Lyle, dear, let's be detached about ourselves. As children and young things, we were a wee bit out of line. It led us both into ghastly mistakes — me into marrying Alfred, you into letting me think you didn't want me. But need we go on building mistake on mistake? This is our second chance. I was your friend, who also loved you. You had no right to put me on a pedestal, but I'll forgive you if you'll help me jump off."

She held out her hands. He took them gently, looking down at them as if they offered hope.

"I did want you — always!" His thoughts were in the past. "You! I could never have loved another woman — even my men friends were only acquaintances, because you absorbed all my capacity for friendship. Physically, you have always seemed to me the loveliest woman I could imagine —"

"Then that is where we can begin again — to find each other . . . *Lyle!*"

As once before, their kiss was a failure.

"I'm sorry, Torrance. I wish it were possible." She clung to him until he removed her arms. "I can't take you as a super-de-luxe edition of one of those girls in Sydney."

She looked at him in misery.

"Life won't give us a third chance, Lyle."

"It only pretended to give us a second chance. We're snuffed out, Torrance — we've ceased to exist as we used to be. There's not enough of us left even to comfort each other."

He passed through the communicating door and shut it behind him.

By the middle of the following morning Lyle was in Rubington instructing the local estate agent to find a purchaser for his house and to sell the furniture at auction.

Mrs. Watkins was on a month's holiday with pay. Lyle admitted himself to the empty house and began the tedious business of sorting his personal possessions.

The new philosophy had collapsed at the first strain and nothing had taken its place. He had yet to discover that a man without a philosophy — however jerry-built and egocentric a philosophy — is the sport

of every indifferent wind that blows.

He was blown off his feet by a routine call of Detective-Constable Bisset of Scotland Yard. Lyle remembered, with sudden terror, that he had told Torrance where he had hidden the revolver. She would have had time to inform the police.

"Well?" he gasped.

"It's quite all right, Mr. McClelland. As a matter of form, we would like to know if it's true that you've put your house up for sale? Meaning you're leaving the neighborhood?"

"Yes. I am moving shortly to Sydney."

"Is your wife going with you?"

"I — er — we haven't discussed it in detail yet. Surely it's no one's concern but our own!"

Bisset took himself off, in search of a telephone booth.

Lyle poured himself a whiskey. He had been a fool to panic at the mere sight of a junior detective making routine inquiries in the wake of a murder. As if Torrance would play a dirty trick like that! He resumed the work of sorting and ticketing — work which was never to be finished.

As he no longer had any system of thought, no ethical code in which he could now place unquestioning reliance, the wind soon blew him in the opposite direction. A woman who would shield the murderer of her husband would be ready enough to betray a lover who had spurned her. The sooner a new hiding place for the clothes and revolver were found, the better. The only practical hiding place now would be the Thames.

He must begin to "think like a crook" all over again. A car running onto the towpath at night would attract attention. But in full daylight, in August, nothing could be more commonplace than a car parked on the edge of the towpath.

He promptly set about loosening the floorboards.

In mid-afternoon he loaded into the car the mackintosh in which he had rolled the revolver and the blood-stained clothing, including the shoes, and drove about five miles to the river. On the towpath he passed one or two parked cars. He found an unoccupied strip, and parked. He had brought books and papers, knowing that he would have to wait until dusk. He was settling down comfortably when another car drew up. Out of it stepped Bisset.

"Sorry to trouble you again, Mr. McClelland. When I told my chief you were off to Australia and didn't know whether your wife was going with you — you were married only yesterday, if I've got it right — he said: 'There's nothing in that, Bisset.' Those were his very words."

"Then may I know why you are following me about?"

"That's all right, sir. My chief said: 'If he's selling that house, Bisset, he'll have to move anything he doesn't want others to find.' So as a matter of form, Mr. McClelland, I'll have to ask you to let me see what you've got in that bundle in the back of your car."

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H-M: *Brett Halliday and Helen McCloy in the Westport (Conn.) Town Crier*

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